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TO DO IT AGAIN



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I'D LIKE TO DO IT AGAIN

PLAYS BY MR. DAVIS

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The Nervous Wreck
and others



OWEN DAVIS

(Photograph from White Studio)

I'D LIKE TO DO IT AGAIN

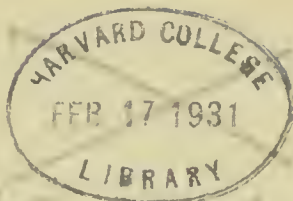
by

OWEN DAVIS



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Mendall G. Smith



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CHAPTER I / FALSE STARTS

AT the time of my mother's death some fifteen years ago, we found among her cherished possessions a soiled and tattered old manuscript written in a scrawling school-boy hand, and inscribed in her neat and graceful lettering—"Owen's first play, when he was just nine years old." This opus bore the somewhat violent title of DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND OR THE RIVAL DETECTIVES and upon reading it over I was struck by one marked originality—toward the end of the first act only one of the characters remained alive, and as the final curtain fell he committed suicide. I had reached some degree of success long before my mother's death, and, once or twice, when some friend spoke of one of my plays as "the best thing I ever wrote," I noticed a somewhat scornful smile on her sensitive lips. She had all of the reticence of the true Yankee and, secure in her possession of the only

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copy of DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND, she could afford to smile.

As a matter of truth, she smiled more frequently than one would expect of the mother of eight children, and her strong and dauntless ambition saw no limits at all to the future of her brood. To those who knew her there is no mystery in the fact that a boy of nine, born in a country town many years before the talking pictures had brought the drama to every hamlet in the world, should have been born with the trick of creating dramatic narrative and the fierce longing to create it.

Bangor, Maine, in the early 80's knew little of the theater. I may have seen UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, Edwin Booth, Joe Jefferson and possibly one or two others, for in those days New York had no monopoly, our great actors played everywhere—but the theater meant less than nothing to my father and little more to any member of our community.

I had been born, however, with the smell of the stage in my nostrils and was as stage-struck before I ever saw a stage as I am to-day after almost thirtv-five



Owen Davis when he entered Harvard in 1889



"Aside from being a fair football player and a very fast hundred-yard sprinter, I did little to distinguish myself." Winning the 100-yard dash at Harvard in May, 1891.

FALSE STARTS

years, during which I have seen very little else and have bitterly resented the few hours I have passed in any other atmosphere.

This hunger for the glamorous and the romantic surely did not come to me from the staid New England farmers and lawyers whose lives had been devoted to the stern necessity of grubbing an existence out of the rather stubborn soil of Maine and Vermont; but, on my mother's side there were certain bold Yanks who had sailed the seas on some of the clipper ships that in those days were built and manned along the coast of Maine. To my mother then, and through her to some adventurer of the deep, I owe the fact that I have never in my life wanted to do, and in truth I never have done, any of the practical, humdrum work of this extremely practical world, but have remained perfectly content to make faces at life and earn my living by drawing pictures on the wall.

If I am right in my opinion that these bad habits of mine came to me from my mother, I must absolve her from the blame of not handing me at the same time some of her own stern pains to repress them.

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Whatever her dreams had been, her realities were practical enough and she was one of the many victims of one of life's modest ironies—a woman who gave so much of herself that the future of her eight children should be what she wanted it to be that she died, still fighting, instead of ever sharing in the success we owe so greatly to her.

Success in life is a difficult thing to estimate. My mother, I am afraid, had little of the thrill of romantic adventure that I knew her spirit craved. Indeed, so far as I know, she had no time and no desire to think of herself at all, and she died before she could be sure that her ambitions for her children would ever be satisfied. Yet I think she was a successful woman.

My recollections of these days, stimulated by this message in her faded handwriting, vaguely recall a long line of literary monstrosities of about the same date, and when my own boys, at about some such absurd age, showed symptoms of having been bitten by some wandering bacteria of the drama, I had an advantage over my father and at once recognized the

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symptoms. Like other dread diseases I knew this one to be incurable, the only treatment being to give the patient plenty of nourishing food, against the time when he will have difficulty in getting it for himself, keep him as cheerful as possible, and hope for the worst.

At the time of my first offense I was a member of a flourishing Dramatic Society and I have a very distinct memory of my rage when at length the worms turned and one of my fellow members arose at a meeting and firmly moved the chair that in future the club devote its energies to performing plays written by some one besides Owen Davis. This was my first experience of dramatic criticism; my second came some fifteen years later, fifteen years during which I am afraid I had drifted away from the worship of the drama and directed myself with equal enthusiasm to playing ball with such rare and occasional intervals of study as seemed necessary to preserve the peace.

The theater seemed very far away. My father at that time was the president of the Society of American Iron Manufacturers and had a small furnace at

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Kathodin Iron Works, a settlement in the Maine woods about fifty miles above Bangor; and after considerable conflict I was persuaded by my father that I had the makings in me of a great mining engineer. If I had not already stated that my sense of humor came to me from my mother's side, this would be a good place to bring it in.

When I was about fifteen, my father's business took him to the Cumberland Mountains in the southern part of Kentucky and he took my mother and the younger children with him, sending my elder brother to Massachusetts Tech and me to Harvard. In 1889 there was no School of the Drama in Harvard, but I can't recall that there was any great yearning on my part for one. For some queer reason the memory of the years I spent there is vague and shadowy. I was not old enough at the time to get the benefits of a great university, and, aside from the fact of being a fair football player and a very fast hundred-yard sprinter, I did little to distinguish myself.

I was a wretched scholar; neither at that time nor at any other have I ever been able to do anything

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unless it happened to be the one thing I wanted to do, and I can't recall that a high grade in any of my studies was at any time one of my ambitions. I went to the Boston theaters whenever I had money enough to get there and I saw all of the great plays and all of the actors of the day, but I worshiped them from a distance and had long ago ceased to hope that my life could in any way be devoted to anything aside from mining engineering. But as I have never been able to understand the simplest scientific problem and still retain a bland uncertainty as to how many times three goes in nine, I doubt if the engineering profession lost much when I later reverted to type.

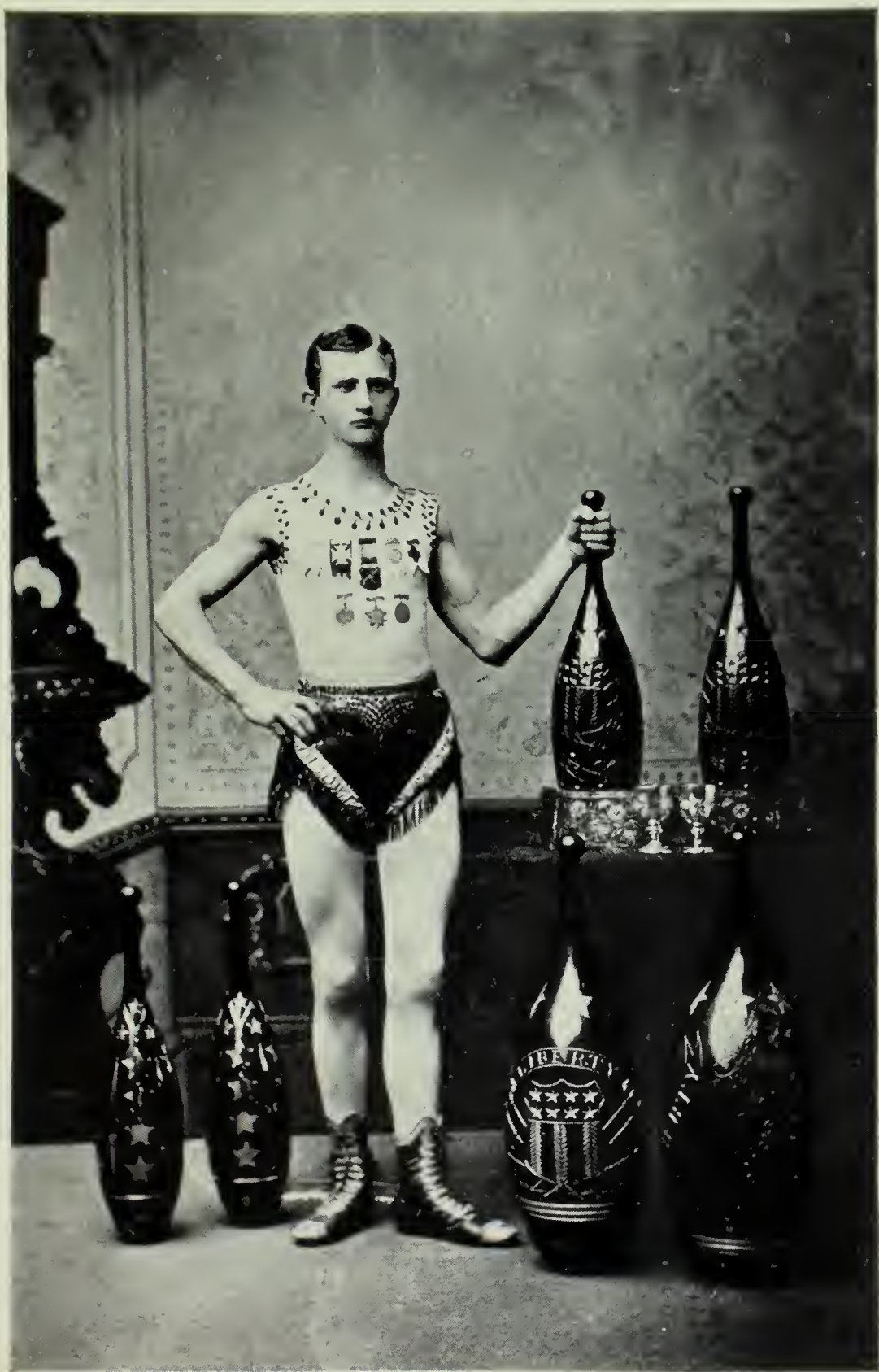
My only adventure in the theater during these years was as a member of what was called "The Society of Arts" which was, I think, the very first art group to undertake to elevate the drama in America. For some reason I have a perfectly distinct recollection of this weighty and august group, although I can't for the life of me remember what I was doing in it. The society was organized by Harvard professors and the distinguished group of men of letters

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who at that time brought glory to Cambridge and Boston.

A large sum of money was raised, a fine company of actors engaged, and a month's rental of the Hollis Street Theatre, Boston, secured. We produced four plays, not written by ordinary playwrights but the product of real literary masters; one by William Dean Howells, one by Frank R. Stockton and the others by famous writers of equal standing. The company was headed by Maurice Barrymore and his wife, and everything was done to attract the "lovers of a better drama" in Boston. But the "lovers of a better drama" in Boston were as scarce in 1890 as they are to-day, and the venture was never a success.

It was a long time ago and my memory is vague as to the merits of our performances, but I do recall one passing comment. Toward the end of the third week the head usher came to me with the news that "all the ushers have quit, and I don't know what we'll do about showing people to their seats, if there are any people to show to their seats." I asked him the reason for this sudden desertion on the part of our ushers and



GUS HILL
Champion Club Swinger



MAURICE BARRYMORE

(Photograph by Sarony. From the Messmore Kendall Collection)

FALSE STARTS

be informed me curtly that "they couldn't stand the ——— shows!"

I don't remember that I greatly mourned the passing of America's first art group in the theater and I loafed along pleasantly enough during my years in Cambridge, winning some glory on the running track and trying to make up for my lack of age and weight, both of which at that time told heavily against me on the football field. By some odd freak I took few of the courses in English and wrote nothing at all, my only advance in any of the fine arts being a training as a draw-poker player, an accomplishment I have never ceased to be grateful for to the great university where I secured so solid and lasting a technique.

I was tremendously influenced at this time by Phillips Brooks, who still stands in my memory as the greatest American I have ever known, and I grew so fond of Professor N. S. Shaler, a grand figure both as a man and a scientist, that I took every one of his courses in paleontology without ever gaining the most remote idea of what they were all about.

Quite without ambition and with no definite ob-

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jective at all I drifted along until, in the summer of 1903, I found myself working for a coal mining company in which my father was interested, in the Cumberland Mountains. I was even a worse mining engineer than I had ever hoped to be and was extravagantly overpaid by my salary of forty dollars a month. I am sure that I, at the time, never considered myself worth any more, but I found it difficult to save out of that forty a month a sum of money large enough to gratify the first great ambition of my life. It came to me suddenly, the very day I went to work in the coal business and consisted of a deep determination to get out of it with the least possible delay.

Aside from the fact that the glamorous title of a mining engineer turned out to be just another name for a guy who dug holes in the ground, I simply detested the dirty little southern town in which I found myself. Also, as I happened to start my work on the very day the Debs strike started, I added fear for my life to my other reason for a prompt withdrawal. There I had to remain, however, all during the riots and shootings and murders of the great strike, and the

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town I lived in was sometimes held by the strikers, and sometimes by the Kentucky State Troops. On occasion both sides were forced to withdraw for a time, as this part of the mountains had long been reserved as a battleground by the Hatfield and McCoy factions, whose feud, arising out of the fact that some young lady of the generation before had looked funny in a hoop skirt, had resulted in the death, with their boots on, of many more worthy citizens than the entire population of the town in my day. Being even then of a strictly impersonal nature, I didn't in the least care whether the McCoy's killed the Hatfields or the strikers killed the state troops. It didn't seem to be my party. All I wanted was a ticket to New York.

I knew that I could expect no help from my father. He had, for the moment, lost all of his money. It was his habit to make and lose considerable fortunes with the rapidity and nonchalance of a Wilkins Micawber, and this was one of the times when, like Micawber, he was waiting for something to turn up. My father was, I am sure, the sweetest and gentlest

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and one of the ablest men I have ever known—and I am equally sure he was the worst business man. I don't know how many months it took me to save the railroad fare to New York, but I know that I arrived there in due time with exactly twelve dollars in my pocket and a firm determination to conquer the theater, either as a writer or as an actor.

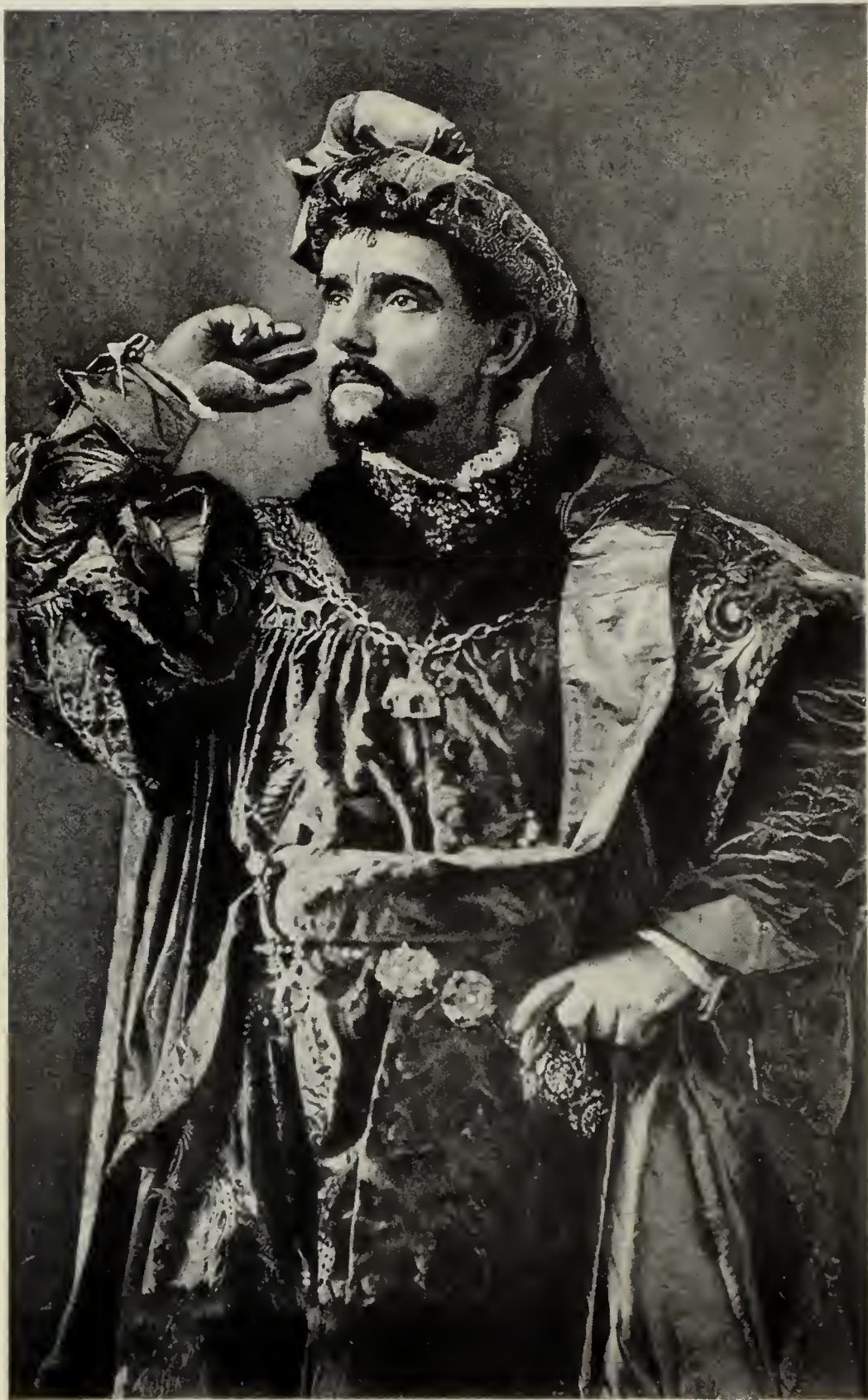
I was indifferent. Let fate decide. Fate, however, had pretty well decided as I was never, as we say in Hollywood, "just the type" for romantic juveniles, having always been about the same distance around as I was up and down, and so I made a final decision to attack as a dramatist. And when I say that in the thirty odd years since then I have had more fun than any man in the world, I am prepared to defend my boast against doubters either on foot or on horseback. If life has taught me anything at all, it is that round pegs belong in round holes and that the one great happiness is to be doing the thing one loves to do.

Twelve dollars is not a large capital for an unknown boy, quite without friends, thrown upon his



Fanny Janauschek as Medea. "The last of the really great actors of the romantic school."

(From the Messmore Kendall Collection)



Lawrence Barrett as Count Lanciotto in *Francesca da Rimini*
(*From the Messmore Kendall Collection*)

FALSE STARTS

own resources in New York, and I am willing to admit that at fifty-six I should scream with terror at what at twenty-two seemed to me to be a glorious adventure.

A. M. Palmer was at that time one of the leading New York managers and after many attempts I succeeded in persuading him to read a play I had written. Fortunately no copy of this drama remains in existence. It was, according to my vague memory, a very terrible affair. But Mr. Palmer, who was a sort of Christopher Columbus of his time, seemed to discover in it some germ of promise, and as in spite of some months of experience I still found it difficult to live without eating, he offered to make me an actor until such time as I was able to live by writing. He put me with an all-star cast supporting Madame Janauschek, the last of the really great tragic actors of the romantic school.

This company contained such well-known artists as Blanche Walsh, W. H. Thompson, Annie Yeamans, Fred Bond, Orin Johnstone, Joseph Whiting, George C. Boniface, Sr., and many others, and opened in

I'D LIKE TO DO IT AGAIN

rather a bad melodrama called THE GREAT DIAMOND ROBBERY, a vehicle quite unworthy of the really great talents of Janauschek who was, in some ways, the finest actress I have ever known. She had been a friend of the very great in Europe, and had come so near to being an actual queen that much of the manner of royalty still clung to her. When I knew her she was short and dumpy and old but in her presence one had the feeling of the latent power and fire of this remarkable woman and a sense of the pity and irony of her slow decay.

My duties as a member of her company had at least the spice of variety, as I played five parts in the play, was assistant stage manager and had the added privilege of sitting at the gallery door for an hour before each performance to count the number of persons who entered, as it was a playful custom of the day for the owner of the theater to sell about twice as many gallery tickets as were found in the box when the count was made. For these duties I was rewarded by the rather small salary of twelve dollars a week, and although twelve dollars went further in those

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days than they do now, they never seemed quite to reach from one Saturday night to the next one.

I played with this company for its run in New York and continued with it for a long road season. The road in those days took in all of the principal towns of the country and, as Janaushek was an established favorite, we did a good business everywhere. My twelve dollars a week that probably wouldn't pay for a room to-day was with a little stretching enough for a decent living, although by the end of each week I was driven to borrowing the morning papers for the want of the two cents necessary to purchase them.

At that time one could live for a week at the second best hotel in any city for ten dollars and a half, room, bath and food. Ten dollars and a half, however, was far beyond me and I usually found possible enough accommodations for about eight dollars. The company made many night journeys, but, as I remember it, the expense of sleeping-car berths never worried me. I solved that problem by turning up the collar of my coat, resting my head on my shabby old suit case and stretching myself out on two seats of a smoking car.

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I had seen little of the country at that time and each new town we came to was a fresh adventure. I loved the life and from the first I never had a doubt but what it was to be mine for the rest of my life. I was sincere in my ambition to become a playwright and at the close of the season I struck out boldly toward that goal. The fact that I was inclined to decide upon play writing rather than acting may have been partly influenced by a parting scene I had with Madame Janauschek the last day of our season.

Janauschek had been extremely kind to me in her rather queenly way and summoned me to her presence at her apartments in one of the great Chicago hotels for a word of parting and advice. After a few formal words in her broken English she presented me with a small photograph of herself on which she had written a gracious message in her native German. She then led me to the door, kissed me firmly on the forehead and said: "Young man—neffer again be an actor," and pushed me out into the hall and closed the door.

The closing of the season and some inward agreement with Madame's verdict ended my attempts at

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acting except for one or two occasions when I was forced by some great emergency to jump into some part to save a performance and one dreadful time, of which I will speak later, when stern necessity seemed to be facing me. Two of the occasions when I had to become an actor or close a theater are fresh in my memory.

During its second season my play *THROUGH THE BREAKERS* was booked to open in Jersey City with a holiday matinée. Unfortunately the worst blizzard of twenty years had been raging and at matinée time several of the company had been unable to cross the river. I was the company manager and after switching the cast about as much as possible I found that the only way to give a performance at all was for me to go on and play the part of the rough and villainous sailor. Reluctantly I decided to go through with it, and did so to the best of my ability. By evening the storm was over and the company were all on hand and, during the extremely melodramatic second act I stood in the rear of the darkened theater and watched the performance. It was just at the height of the

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villainous sailor's most villainous moment when the head usher, who happened to be beside me, whispered: "That ain't the same man who played the old sailor this afternoon." "No," I answered, "it isn't." "I thought it wasn't," replied the usher, "seems to me he's a damned sight better."

The other occasion of which I wrote—and, come to think of it, my last appearance as an actor on any stage—was in a musical comedy I concocted about twenty-five years ago for John C. Rice and Sally Cohen, then and for many years afterwards favorite entertainers of vaudeville and musical comedy. Saturday night of the first week of the play John Rice came to me and in a hoarse whisper informed me he had completely lost his voice, a fact that was only too evident to any one who witnessed his distress in trying to speak above a whisper. The house was sold out and I owned a third of the show, so it required very little persuasion from the local theater manager to induce me to take a chance. Sally Cohen was, I think, the first to propose that I take her famous husband's part, and I distinctly recall that the only thing that



SALLY COHEN, 1898

With Rice, one of the "favorite entertainers of vaudeville and musical comedy."

(Courtesy of The Players)



JOHN C. RICE, 1896
(*Courtesy of The Players*)

FALSE STARTS

prevented John Rice from absolutely forbidding it was the fact that by that time he was quite incapable of making any sound at all and could only protest by frantic signs and facial contortions.

At first the fact that Rice was one of the greatest dancers living and that he had six songs to sing rather dampened my confidence, not only because I didn't know either the songs or the dance steps, but because I never sang a song or danced a step in my life. Little obstacles, however, never troubled me in those days, and although I was three inches shorter and fifty pounds heavier than Rice I calmly arrayed myself in his opening costume and rang the curtain up. About all I remember of that night is that we got the money, although for years afterwards whenever I chanced to meet that local manager he fell into a violent fit of laughter, the cause of which he was never satisfactorily able to explain.

CHAPTER II ✓ SELLING THE FIRST ONE

ALTHOUGH I am rambling about a little ahead of my story the reader will have observed that by this time I had crossed the Rubicon and had sold my first play and was steaming ahead at full speed. Very few weeks pass during which I am not asked "how to sell a first play" and for the benefit of all would-be dramatists I propose to pause here and answer this question for all time by giving a brief description of how I sold mine.

I had no money at all and absolutely no idea of who the managers were or how to approach them, but I had a play, or at least I had an amazing number of perfectly good words neatly set down on paper, and I started boldly out on my quest. This quest proved as it almost always does an unbelievably long and difficult one. Luck favored me by bringing about a chance meeting on Broadway with an old friend, the

SELLING THE FIRST ONE

captain of the Harvard varsity football team on which I had been a substitute, and through him I managed to land the job of coaching the football squad of a New York prep school at a salary of fifty dollars a month. So the food and shelter problem was solved for the next few months. But all good things, even football seasons, come to an end, and before I had discovered, first, that no one would read my play, and, second, that it was absolutely not worth reading anyway, I had some hard knocks and some rather dire experiences. At length I made up my mind that possibly the reason I couldn't sell my play was because it was a bad one and I started another, but stern necessity was knocking hard and loud and in a moment of discouragement I made up my mind to again become an actor. A kind Providence, however, saved me from this fate, although at the moment I was tempted to doubt its kindness.

I wrote a letter to the late James O'Neill, who as usual was rehearsing his company at his home in New London; some mention of my experience at Harvard caught O'Neill's eye and he wrote me to join the com-

I'D LIKE TO DO IT AGAIN

pany at New London, but he evidently did not think it necessary to enclose transportation to a worthy Harvard graduate. I arrived in New London one beautiful August day in 1898 or thereabouts with a capital of ninety cents, and was asked by Mr. O'Neill to memorize six parts in the various plays he was to do that season, and to read one of them, the part of the juvenile lead in VIRGINIOS to him the following morning. To this day when things are breaking very badly for me I am haunted by some of these terrible lines: "Spread the news in every corner of the city, and let no man who calls himself a son of Rome stand aside when tyranny assails its fairest daughter." O'Neill listened to my reading of the part and swallowed hard and remarked that "I still needed a little work," and then made me the princely offer of twenty dollars a week for the season if I would buy seven hundred and fifty dollars' worth of costumes for the parts. At that it was my turn to swallow hard as my ninety cents had shrunk considerably during the last twenty-four hours, but I managed to stammer out that I'd think it over and let him know.



"O'Neill listened to my reading of the part."

(A caricature by Fornaro. From the Messmore Kendall Collection)



Edwin Booth as Richelieu
(From the Messmore Kendall Collection)

SELLING THE FIRST ONE

Mr. O'Neill went into town to spend the evening leaving me seated on a rock busy with a mathematical problem, and as I never was a great mathematician I sat there on that rock until twelve o'clock that night trying to figure out how to expand the remains of my ninety cents to cover seven hundred and fifty dollars for costumes and enough over to live on for five weeks before my salary was to start. It was a difficult problem, but I still think if I had been given a little more time I would have solved it. I was interrupted, however, by the sound of voices approaching in the night. Mr. O'Neill's home was in a secluded spot. On one side of it ran the raised tracks of the New Haven railroad. In the house at that moment young Eugene O'Neill was sleeping in his crib. At the sound of voices I looked up, my problem still unsolved. Its solution came very suddenly. Mr. O'Neill, returning along the raised railroad tracks, stubbed his toe and fell through an open culvert and landed at my feet with both his legs broken. I left New London the next day. I have often been back since that night, but my watch is still there.

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Had I known as much in those days as I now know of the enormous difficulties ahead of me it is possible that I might have feared them, but at the time my confidence was more developed than my prudence and I had no fear at all. This is, of course, the usual attitude of youth. The obstacles ahead that seem like mountains to the experience of middle age are only mole hills to a young man of twenty odd who quite expects to leap over them without a change of stride.

Yet I doubt if any undertaking in the world is any more difficult than that of one who elects to make a living as a dramatist. He must win his place and then he must hold it, and of the two the last is really the most difficult. The late Charles Kline told me just before his death that the most pitiful thing in the world was a playwright who had written a big success and learned enough of the difficulties of doing it to feel absolutely convinced that there wasn't the slightest chance of his ever being able to do it again. Every young playwright must put up with a number of things that cut deep into a sensitive nature and leave

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sears that never quite die away. Many men and women of talent, who might have developed into fine writers for the theater find themselves too sensitive for the harsh contacts and give up in despair. The hours of waiting in managers' offices, ignored and unwelcome, the contemptuous acceptance of plays to be read that are ultimately glanced over by an office boy and scornfully rejected, are all a part of the game.

I took one of my first plays to the Frohman office. What happened to it there was, or at least I thought it was, a matter of life or death to me. I had no money at all and during the five weeks I was waiting for a verdict I sold what few clothes I had left, piece by piece, to pay my three dollars a week room rent and spent thirty cents a day for food. At last I was ushered into the presence of the play reader, later one of the great men of the theater, who met me with this encouraging speech: "You are," he said, "a strong and husky young man, with, so I have heard, some reputation as an athlete. Why don't you take this play of yours and see how far you can throw it?" This was hardly a tactful rejection, and as it turned out rather

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a silly one, as the play in question some years later made a very reasonable success.

One must be prepared for this sort of thing and resolute enough to thrive on it, as success very rarely comes upon a young playwright very suddenly. It doesn't sneak up behind one and thrust fame and fortune into one's lap, fame and fortune being very timid birds, more likely to fall into the lap of the one who goes out after them with a gun than to the dreamer who sits at home and waits patiently. In my experience patient waiting never got anybody anything. All the prizes worth having are for the daring—the one who sits and waits never got anything—except fat.

A dramatist isn't a dramatist at all until he has had a play produced, no matter how many plays he may have written, and he must get that first production at any cost. It is natural enough that the managers should hesitate before purchasing the play of an untried writer, especially as there are only a few of them who themselves know enough about a play to have any real confidence in their own reaction. The successful

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author, of course, has a great advantage, and a man with one or two hits to his credit can get a pretty bad play accepted. Yet Mr. Shaw's observation that "If it's by a good writer it's a good play" doesn't mean quite as much as it used to, since the critic of late has developed a rather alarming habit of eagerly leaping at the throat of the man who is obviously trading on an established reputation and trying to get away with careless and sloppy work.

In some ways it is, I think, more difficult for a beginner to-day than it was in my youth. In those days almost any play that got itself produced made some money for its author and any honest writer of long experience would own up to considerable sums made from plays that cost their producers a lot of money. To-day, however, plays die quickly and a failure means that the writer gets little, if anything, more than the trifling sum of his advance, which is seldom over five hundred and almost never, in America, over one thousand dollars. The pleasant old custom of a manager keeping a young writer's bad plays running long enough for the writer to live comfortably until he

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learned how to write a better one has passed along with the other nice old romantic notions and to-day he has to hit it the first time or walk the plank.

It is, naturally enough, about as difficult for the beginner to learn how to write without any real chance of slowly and gradually learning his business as it is for the young actor of to-day to learn how to act without any real experience in acting; he lacks the training of the good stock companies of twenty years ago, or of the classic drama where he had to play many small parts before he was ever trusted with a big one. He is asked now to play any part he can look, and is given leading parts to play and fails in them more from lack of experience than from lack of talent. This doesn't in the least mean that I think the acting of twenty-five years ago was better than the acting of to-day, because I know better. The lack of the training of the old days is unfortunate, but the change in method more than makes up for it, and although at present we have few great actors we have a tremendous supply of very competent ones. Although at this writing too many of them are in Hollywood, we can still find a good



CHARLES FROHMAN

"I took one of my first plays to the Frohman office."

(From a caricature in the Messmore Kendall Collection)



HARRIGAN AND HART
(From the Messmore Kendall Collection)

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cast far more easily than we can find a good play, and there are still far too many promising young actors unable to get a chance to prove their worth. But their problem is simple compared to the problem of the young playwright, now or twenty years ago.

Each generation, I suppose, has its own problems, but the problem of the one starting out to win a place in a crowded and difficult profession is never easily solved. It is well, however, to remember that all these fences built up in front of us to hold us back remain firmly standing after we have managed to scramble over them and they keep on blocking the road and give a little breathing time to those who have succeeded in getting a start.

It's a tough game any way you figure it, and it's a queer, lonely and depressing existence. A young writer must do it all himself and usually against the advice and the doubts of his acquaintances. He must run around New York with that first play under his arm until both his feet and his heart are sore, and he rarely meets any one who takes the slightest interest

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in it. Nobody has any faith or confidence in him; probably he has very little money—I very distinctly remember that I had none at all—he will very likely be as hungry and lonely and frightened as I was. But if the play under that young writer's arm is a real play—and every once in a while it is—he is not a half starved lonely vagrant but a prince on a masquerade. He doesn't know it; the cold and half contemptuous clerks and secretaries he meets can't see through his disguise, but he is a bigger man than any of these who snub him and outranks the best of them. Soon his time will come—"The King is dead. Long live the King." At the time I started, however, I knew nothing at all of what was ahead of me, and had, as I recall it, few doubts and no misgivings.

Fate having thrust me back into the ranks of the dramatists I have never again dared to desert and devoted my efforts only to play writing, although at odd times, driven by financial or business necessity, I have served in all the branches of the theater, having worked as actor, stage manager, stage director, treasurer, box-office man, advance agent, play doctor,

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dramatist, business manager, partner in plays of my own and of other writers, as well as in later years serving a rather varied apprenticeship in the motion picture studios both in New York and in California.

Determined to sell this first play of mine I approached at this time the firm of Davis and Keough and tried to sell them a romantic costume drama dealing with the Wars of the Roses. When Mr. Keough got through laughing, he asked me to go that night to see a play he had just produced called *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY* and to call on him the next day. When I called he asked me if "I thought I could write a play like that." I replied that I thought anybody could, but didn't see why they should. But when he told me that he would give me five hundred dollars if I wrote one he liked, I rushed back to my furnished room and went to work. I am sure the play I wrote was almost as bad as the one he sent me to see, but for some deep managerial reason he couldn't see it and told me to go away and stop bothering him. The Davis and Keough melodrama, however, had made

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me think. I had seen that the theater had been crowded with an audience that responded tremendously to the crude plot and the rather obvious situations and, as I had told Mr. Keough, it had seemed to me to be a simple formula to acquire. Later investigation convinced me that this formula was capable of some expansion without loss to its effectiveness and I began a rather more scientific study of this form of play manufacture than had ever before seemed necessary to any of the writers who had been engaged in it.

As a result of this study I soon evolved a rather mechanical but really effective mold that served me in the writing of more than one hundred and fifty of these melodramas with an average of success that seems startling to me as I look back upon it. Charles Dickens had beaten me to the trick and of course many others have used it, but as a labor-saving device it served me well. It had always seemed to me that Dickens's stories fell very readily into three molds: one represented by *THE TALE OF TWO CITIES*, one by *DAVID COPPERFIELD* and one by the strictly humorous type

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represented by *THE PICKWICK PAPERS*. I therefore devised my molds, in my case represented by such western thrillers as *THE GAMBLER OF THE WEST*, the second type the New York comedy drama represented by *CHINATOWN CHARLIE* and *BROADWAY AFTER DARK*, and the last group of what Hollywood would call the "sexy" type, illustrated by *NELLIE*, *THE BEAUTIFUL CLOAK MODEL* and a long string of her persecuted and unfortunate sisters.

It took me some months to figure all this out and to experiment with my different forms, months of very hard work, as I wrote all day and every night went to the fifteen-cent gallery of one of the popular-priced houses, making a real study, not of the plays but of the audiences. When the very hard-boiled gentleman who sat next to me wept or laughed or applauded, I wasn't at first always sure of his reason, my duller mind not at that time responding to the sentimental dramatic or comedy cue as quickly as his trained intelligence, and I made a point of falling into conversation with my neighbors in an effort to share as fully in the delight of those present as was possible

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for an unfortunate inhibited by a Harvard background.

After a time, trained by my comrades in the packed and poorly ventilated galleries, I found myself thrilling with delight to the noble if somewhat banal sentiment of such good old phrases as: "Rags are royal raiment when worn for virtue's sake," and taking the utmost satisfaction in the retribution that always followed the villain and in the sweet, and somewhat sticky, rewards of those whose feet had never strayed from the straight and narrow path. Of course life was never like that, but just as obviously it ought to be, and to the dull lives of the working people of thirty-five years ago these absurd dramas of ours brought almost their only glimpse of romance.

The old melodramas were practically motion pictures, as one of the first tricks I learned was that my plays must be written for an audience who, owing to the huge, uncarpeted, noisy theaters, couldn't always hear the words and who, a large percentage of them having only recently landed in America, couldn't have understood them in any case. I therefore wrote for

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the eye rather than the ear and played out each emotion in action, depending on my dialogue only for the noble sentiments so dear to audiences of that class.

With my mind made up to a conquest of the sensational melodrama field I worked hard on my first script and in the course of time had it ready. Curiously enough I had turned out a good play, rather above the usual specimen of its kind, and as a matter of fact one of the most honest and complete successes I have ever had. I knew little of its worth at the time, but I liked the thing, not unusual in a young dramatist, and I made up my mind to have it produced. To that end I made up a list of theatrical managers starting with the A's and ending with the X's and set out to call on all of them.

I don't remember much about the A's but the B's were led by the name of William A. Brady. For a week I called at his office daily with my play under my arm. There seemed to be a certain vagueness among Mr. Brady's clerks as to when he could be seen and after five or six days I ventured to ask one of them

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where Mr. Brady was, to be met with the heart-felt answer: "I wish to God I knew." Which goes to prove after all how slight are the changes the years bring.

Pursuing my alphabetical course, I came at last to the H's and found the name of "Gus Hill." After diligent inquiry I discovered that Gus Hill was the manager of "Gus Hill's Stars," at that time holding forth in a burlesque theater in Brooklyn. The day before the D's having failed me in the person of the late Augustin Daly, I started for Brooklyn and Gus Hill. I asked for Mr. Hill at the stage door of the Star Theatre and was pointed out his dressing room and told that Mr. Hill was "in there." I knocked somewhat timidly at this door and a voice called "Come in," and I entered to see a slight, blond, pleasant-looking man, quite naked, who was rubbing himself down with a towel. I later learned that Mr. Gus Hill was at that time the "Champion Club Swinger of the World" and that he had just finished his usual stunt of swinging great clubs several times larger than himself.

As this turned out to be the critical moment of my



"The B's were led by the name of William A. Brady"
(Photo by White Studio)



“Henry Miller was . . . the greatest teacher of acting I have ever known.”

(Photo by Arnold Genthe)

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life, pardon me if I drop into the dialogue form in an attempt to do it justice. Mad as the following may seem, it is true to the very last word. This is what actually took place between a very much embarrassed youth and a bland, blond, smiling and quite naked gentleman named Gus Hill:

SCENE

Gus Hill's Dressing Room in Star Theatre, Brooklyn.

CHARACTERS

GUS HILL, thirty-five, a slight man of extraordinarily powerful frame, good-natured, smiling, costume absolutely none.

OWEN DAVIS, twenty-four, stout, a bit shy. Costume—the only one he had.

[As the curtain rises, GUS HILL is discovered rubbing himself down with the contents of a bottle on the label of which we read the words "For Man or Beast." There is a timid knock on the door and GUS HILL calls:]

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HILL

Come in! [*The knock is repeated and again he calls:*] Come in you —— fool! [*The door opens and DAVIS enters timidly and looks a bit impressed as he takes in the scene.*]

[*Note: At this time DAVIS was not hardened to managers and could still be impressed.*]

HILL

[*Pleasantly*]

Who are you?

DAVIS

Er—Er—I'm—er—an author.

HILL

The hell you are? Do you know you're the first one of 'em I ever saw this close. What do you want?

DAVIS

Er—well—I thought I—er—I'd like to have you produce my play.

HILL

All right, sit down on the trunk.

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DAVIS

[*On trunk*]

Well—er—that is—er— What I mean is I'd like to have you produce my play.

HILL

What the hell is the matter with you? Didn't I tell you "all right"?

DAVIS

Yes, sir—what I mean is—I—er—I was wondering if—if you'd mind very much if I was to read you my play?

HILL

If I keep on in this game I suppose I may have to come to that, but right now I wouldn't know anything about it. I'm looking for a play and you say you've got one—what's the answer?

DAVIS

Yes, sir—er—what I mean is—I came here—that is I'd very much like to have you produce my play.

HILL

——! If you keep on talking long enough I'm

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——! ——! sure I won't, let's fix it up quick. How much do you want for it?

DAVIS

Well—er—as a matter of fact I don't quite know. You see, to tell you the truth, this—er—er—this is the first time I ever sold a play if—if this is a time.

HILL

Don't you know what they sell for?

DAVIS

Er—No, sir.

HILL

You're a hell of an author.

DAVIS

Er—yes, sir.

HILL

I tell you what, I'll give you fifty dollars a week and put up all the money. Then, after I got it back, if and when, I'll give you one-third of all the play makes. What do you think of that?

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DAVIS

I don't believe it.

HILL

[*Thoughtfully*]

I've heard it said that some guys could write pretty good plays when to look at 'em you'd wonder how they did it! When we do our play who's going to hire the actors and get the scenery and rehearse it?

DAVIS

[*Calmly*]

I am.

HILL

Do you know how?

DAVIS

Er—er—I—I hope so.

HILL

[*Sadly*]

Yes—so do I.

END OF SCENE

This was my introduction to Gus Hill and a true account of how my first play was placed for production. The play was a melodrama called THROUGH

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THE BREAKERS and it ran for five years in the popular-priced theaters of America and was produced in England, Australia and South Africa with real success. In spite of Mr. Hill's quite natural doubts, I did all of the things I told him I would do, and by some kind of luck or fate, or by the aid of a really tremendous enthusiasm that has always been my one claim to anything unusual in the way of talent, I got the play on the stage and gave a really good performance.

The first matinée of THROUGH THE BREAKERS was the occasion of the second dramatic criticism to which I alluded some half mile back in this rambling narrative. The play was produced in Bridgeport, Conn., and the morning papers had been very flattering in their account of the first performance of this first born child of mine. I was standing at the back of the theater during the matinée listening with rapture to my words, and in all the world there is no listening to equal a young author's, when my bliss was rudely shattered by a low-voiced comment from a gentleman with a dirty collar who sat in the last row. "I have," remarked this gentleman to his companion, "seen a lot

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of shows in my time, but this is probably the rottenest
—— ——— of a show I have ever seen!”

Even in those days I was a meek and quiet and extremely reasonable man so I merely smiled and bent over the railing and touched the gentleman with the dirty collar on the shoulder and whispered softly: “Excuse me, but there is a message for you outside.” After some persuasion I convinced the gentleman that “some one outside” was asking for him and he followed me willingly enough to the front door. The theater, luckily, was what used to be called an “upstairs house” and twenty-five or thirty steps led gently down to the street. As we approached the head of this stairway, still smiling I drew back my arm and hit the astonished critic a snappy uppercut that tumbled him all the way to the sidewalk, then returned to my pleasant duty of listening to my own words.

This story was noised abroad during the next fifteen or twenty years and was once used by Alexander Woollcott in an article; used, as I recall it, by him to explain some favorable notice he had written of one of my plays.

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In justice to myself, however, I must pause here to say that I have been called worse things than the man with the dirty collar called me by many critics who are still alive and healthy. As a matter of fact I honestly think that critics in the end are rarely unfair, and very seldom wrong. It is an absurdity to say that they ever make or break a play. A good play is a very sturdy and very important force in itself, of far more importance than the opinion of any critic, and in the end it lives or dies because it's good or because it isn't. Critics can, and have, made a bad play live for a short time, but they never killed a good one—and what's more, they never wanted to. I have never been an especial pet of dramatic critics, my somewhat spectacular career not exactly fitting with their idea of the proper dignity of a dramatist. Yet whenever I have written a really fine play they have been quick and generous in their praise of it. So I have always felt they had a perfect right to go after me tooth and nail upon the more frequent occasions when I have stubbed my toe.

CHAPTER III ✓ THEN AND NOW

DRAMATIC criticism, like all of the other arts having to do with our theater, has changed, and like the others the change of the last few years has been for the better. When I first came to New York, William Winter was by far the outstanding critic, and his opinions were eagerly waited for and had great influence. I doubt if any critic of to-day is his equal in some ways, yet the best men of to-day have, I think, a far greater influence upon the actual writing of plays. In William Winter's time the Shakespearian tradition was strong and the plays of modern writers were of secondary importance. Acting then was more important than play writing, while to-day the dramatist is the important figure in almost every production.

I do not in the least mean that acting to-day is any less vital than it used to be, but the standard of acting and of directing is very much higher. Very few first

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class producers who are fortunate enough to secure a good play are bunglers enough not to take full advantage of it and we have grown to expect adequate performances and take them quite as a matter of course. Even ten years ago there were a number of stars who were sure of some business no matter what play they might appear in, but I think it is a fair statement that to-day no actor alive can do any business at all unless the play is satisfactory. In any case it was the dramatist and not the actor who was responsible for the birth of the new type of drama in America, and when the writer threw into the discard the romantic, the heroic and the sentimental, the actor was forced to change his method. Booth and Jefferson could have played in a modern reticent play, because they were, in their day, outstanding in the quiet and normal method they used, but most of the great actors of our theater would have been lost if they had been deprived of their grand passions and their carefully developed heroics. Of course these men and women played in the accepted tradition of their time, and their talents would have been trained to-day in a different direction.

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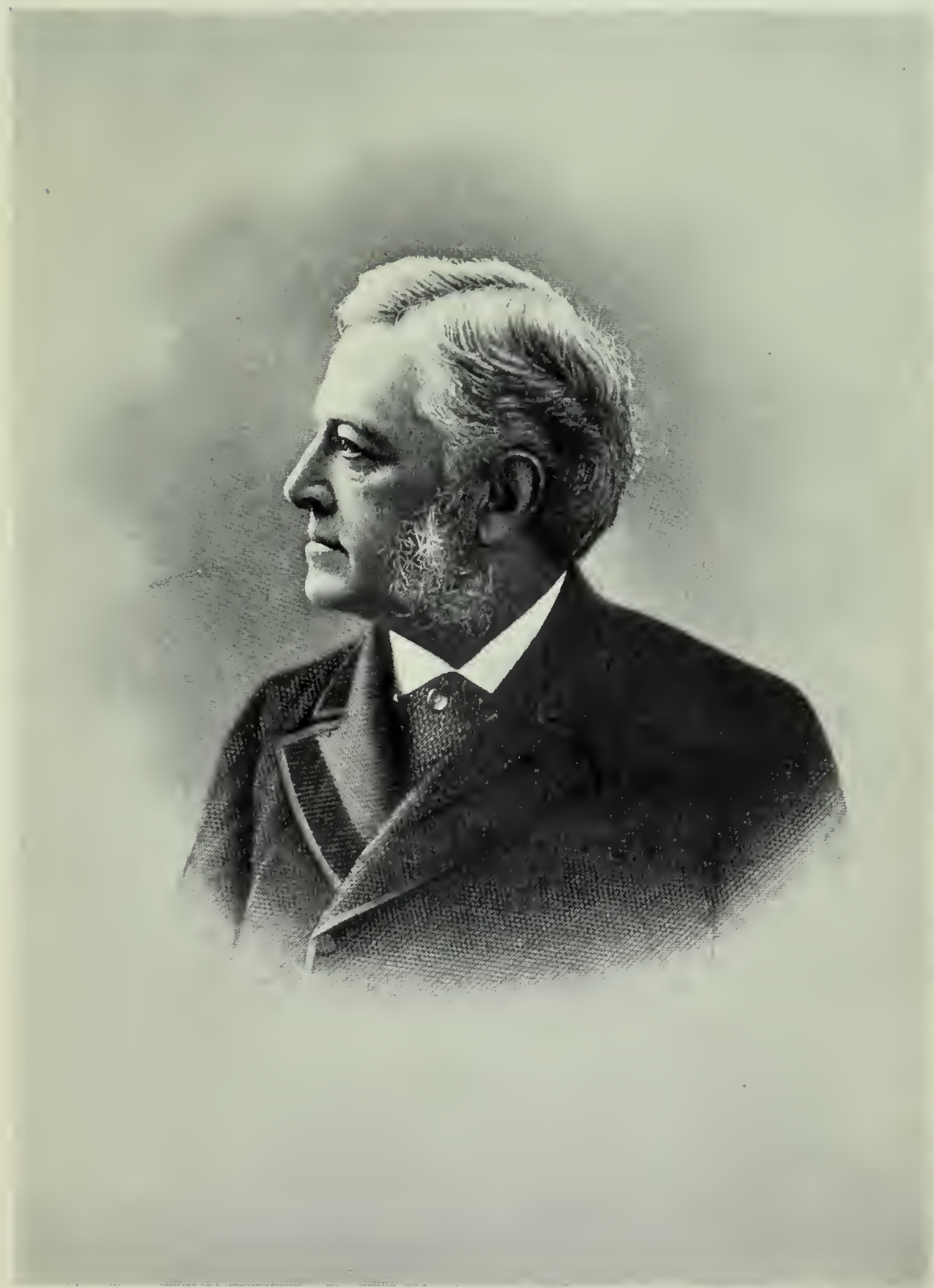
We miss the diction of the good actor of the old school and his beautifully trained voice, and his thorough grasp of all the details of his business, but the characterizations of to-day are far nearer to real life and far less set and conventional than they were under the old system. When I first went into the theater, an actor would be handed a part and told that it was, let us say, "a Sir Francis Levinson." He would play it that way, and usually play it very well, but frequently in a rather tryingly cut and dried manner.

Directing, too, has become very much more important than it used to be, at least in the sense that there are more good directors, although among the list of men whom I consider to have been the best directors I have ever known, several were of the theater of years ago. Augustin Daly was a master; no man of to-day is any better; for years his company was quite justly the pride of America. A. M. Palmer was a man of taste and shrewd knowledge of the theater. He was the first man I ever worked with and one of the best. Palmer was a man of great cultivation and in his appearance amazingly different from

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any of our managers to-day. He was a very dignified little man who wore a brand of whiskers now quite obsolete, and his manner always seemed to me to be more suited to the pulpit than to the stage. He was, I am sure, both a worthy and a deeply religious man, and it was his custom at the end of the last rehearsal to stand on the stage, surrounded by his company, and raise his hands in an attitude of benediction and say: "Ladies and gentlemen—now we are in the hands of God." I recall an occasion when he rather spoiled the effect of this pious observation by turning to the stage electrician and continuing in the same breath: "And for God's sake don't you forget that first act light cue again."

Charles Hoyt, probably the best farce writer the world has ever known, was a fine director. All of his plays were built at rehearsal and on the road before their first New York engagement. It was his custom to engage a cast of sure fire comedians and fashion his play around them. He would call on Tim Murphy, Otis Harlan, May Irwin and actors of that standing, and start out with his central idea, always an ironic



A. M. Palmer

"The first man I ever worked with and one of the best."

(From the Messmore Kendall Collection)



"Augustin Daly was a master; no man of to-day is any better."
(From the Messmore Kendall Collection)

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snapshot of some social or political absurdity. When his play first opened, it would run at the most about thirty minutes, and each of the performers would be called upon to sing two or three songs or do their specialty. Out they would go, usually into New England, in the early spring, and as the days passed there would be more and more dialogue and fewer and fewer songs, until in the end the farce would have been written and ready for its New York opening. Hoyt built in this way A TEXAS STEER, A TRIP TO CHINA-TOWN, A RAG BABY, A TIN SOLDIER and several others, all of them sound farces and all of them very successful.

David Belasco then, as now, was a master of the mechanics of the theater, and is a man who always has amazed me and won my very honest admiration. His love of the theater as an institution is, I am sure, as deep and as real as mine, and his skill and patience and perfection of detail had a great influence upon the growth of our theater.

Henry Miller was not only a great director, but I think the greatest teacher of acting I have ever known.

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Any young actor or actress who passed through his hands had something behind them. He died as he had lived, ready for his job—waiting for the curtain to go up—and although I have never wanted to exchange my own life for any other man's, I must admit I am a little envious of Henry Miller's death.

Charles Frohman knew what he wanted of his company and how to get it, and Daniel Frohman's company was always guided by his good taste and honesty. Daniel Frohman is no longer active as a producer, but he holds, I think, the first place in the hearts of all of us who work in the theater. In saying this I am not thinking alone of his work for the Actors' Fund, although his work there has been enormously important. But aside from that his sympathy and his appreciation of all the good work done by any of us, actor or dramatist, have given courage and joy to a lot of hard workers who at times were in sore need of both. I know that among my treasures I have a letter he wrote me just after the production of *ICEBOUND* that I value above the Pulitzer Prize that soon followed it. We of the theater are a close corporation, and we

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value the praise of our own people more than we do any opinion from the outside.

Erlanger, the business head of the theater for many years, had a lot to do with the production of his own plays, and although not a director, he made his influence felt.

William A. Brady at his best is a truly inspired director, and I have seen him do work that was fine and true; his ear is almost perfect, and his sense of the pulse and rhythm of melodrama is absolutely unfailing. He has faults to offset these virtues, but when he is right, when the scene he is directing is the kind of scene he knows about, he is a hard man to beat.

I could go on writing for hours of the many adventures I had with Mr. Brady, grave and gay, absurd and thrilling, but in all of them there was at least the virtue of novelty. In all the years I worked with him he never by any chance did what I expected him to do, and he never did the same thing twice. After I was through with the popular-priced drama and was making an effort to get started as a Broadway writer, he

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was the first man who had any confidence in me, and he gave me my first chance.

Picking in my mind at random for a story in which Mr. Brady figures, I am suddenly swamped by the recollection of a hundred. I recall, for instance, how he and John Cranwell and I worked for five days and six nights at a dress rehearsal of *THE WORLD WE LIVE IN* without a break, living on ham sandwiches and milk and sleeping for half an hour at a time on a pile of discarded drapery. Our first important play together was *THE FAMILY CUPBOARD*. The big scene was a conflict between a son and his father, in which the boy strikes the father, then, overcome by horror and remorse, falls sobbing at the father's feet. Forrest Wynant was the boy and William Morris the father. Neither Mr. Brady nor I was satisfied with the progress of the scene, and at length Mr. Brady jumped up on the stage and brushed Mr. Wynant aside and played the long and very dramatic scene for him, and ended by falling sobbing at William Morris's feet, absolutely all in from the terrific effort he had made. As he ended there was a silence—we were all thrilled

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—Brady lay there panting and perspiring. Mr. Wy-
nant alone seemed to be unmoved. He looked down
at Mr. Brady's heaving figure and said earnestly—
“Mr. Brady—would you mind doing that again?”

Some years later, at the dress rehearsal of a mystery
play of mine, at 9.45, John Cranwell and I were alone
in the front of the theater. Mr. Brady was ill at home.
The rehearsal was dreadful; there was no pace at all;
it was dead and flat, and I knew that unless some
miracle happened we faced a failure. We had been
told not to bother Mr. Brady, but I was desperate, and
without a word to John Cranwell I ran out of the thea-
ter and drove to Mr. Brady's house, where I dragged
him out, almost by force, sick and surly. He arrived at
the theater protesting that he was a dying man and
couldn't possibly be of any help to me even if he
wanted to, and that he was remarkably sure he didn't,
or words to that effect. Still grumbling, he stepped
through the front door and as he did so his ear caught
the flat note in the performance that had so alarmed
me. In ten seconds he was at the footlights with the
entire company following his tone as an orchestra

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follows the hand of their conductor, and in two hours he had set the tempo of the play.

This same AT 9.45 was the only play not closed by the actors' strike of eleven years ago; we kept it open—I am sure I don't know why—and I doubt if Mr. Brady does. It was, I suppose, because we both of us love a fight and we had a perfectly grand time in doing a thing that no one else was able to do. As most of our actors left us at the first demand of their union, we would have been sunk at once if Mr. Brady had not called for help, and we built up a cast from some very important actors who were not in sympathy with the Equity Society. There were, however, very few of these, and it became necessary for Mr. Brady himself to play the most difficult part, a butler with a big scene. He played him—big scene and all—plus the most amazing stage side-whiskers I had seen in many years. Mr. Brady loved it, whiskers and all, and had the time of his life. I truly think he was sorry when the strike was ended.

Winthrop Ames was one of the fine stage directors, and although never especially active in the theater,

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every production he made was almost perfect in its detail.

Winchell Smith, the best of the dramatist-directors, knows more theater than any of us, and has been responsible for a lot of fine work.

James Forbes, Rachel Crothers, George Kelly, Elmer Rice and Frank Craven are all first rate directors of their own plays. I myself have had a lot of experience in this work but I am sorry to say that I have one rather annoying trait as a director. It is so much easier for me to make up a new play than it is to be bothered by following a manuscript that I am quite likely to get my company a trifle mixed.

Among the professional directors, Robert Milton is a first class man and Sam Forrest has skill and great experience. Hugh Ford, who worked with George Tyler for many years, had probably the longest unbroken string of successes.

George Abbott, both as a writer, actor and director, brings sanity and good judgment to every job he undertakes and deserves every bit of his very unusual success.

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Aside from the dramatists who direct their own plays and the free lance stage directors, there is, of course, Arthur Hopkins, in many ways a better man than any of us. He does a play because he likes it; it doesn't in the least matter to him whether you or I like it or not; he is absolutely untouched by any man's opinion but his own, and surely no one man in our theater has done so much fine work or done it with a higher motive. He saw beauty in it—no other reason ever did or ever will make him produce a play.

George Tyler, John Golden and Sam Harris are managers who are constructive in their attitude to authors and many of their successes have been due to their sympathetic attitude toward the authors with whom they work.

George Cohan is a great director and a remarkable play-doctor, but of late his own plays have taken most of his time.

Jed Harris seems to me to be a truly remarkable editor. I have never seen him direct a play, but I have talked plays with him, and if I am any judge of plays

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he knows a lot about them. He has gone far already for so young a man, but he will go further.

Reuben Marmoulain and Chester Erskine are among the new men. Both of them have something.

There are other good directors, of course. Just at present I have been writing only of the men I knew.

The theater of the nineties, even the first class theater, was very different from what it is to-day and the difference, of course, was due to the difference in our audiences. The stage always reflects the times and one could easily enough get a mental picture of any period or of any civilization by a careful study of ten or a dozen successful dramas and comedies of the day.

America during these years was still dominated by a Puritan tradition and its drama was based upon a stern Puritan creed and an almost equally uncomfortable sentimentality. It must be remembered also that at this time our "melting pot" joke was at its very funniest and every year hundreds of thousands of foreign born flung themselves upon our hospitable, if somewhat indiscriminating, shores and each year a good number of these were joined to our audiences.

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The demand was for good acting also rather than for good plays, just as it is now in the "talkies." It is, I think, only when the drama has grown to maturity that the focus shifts from the player to the play.

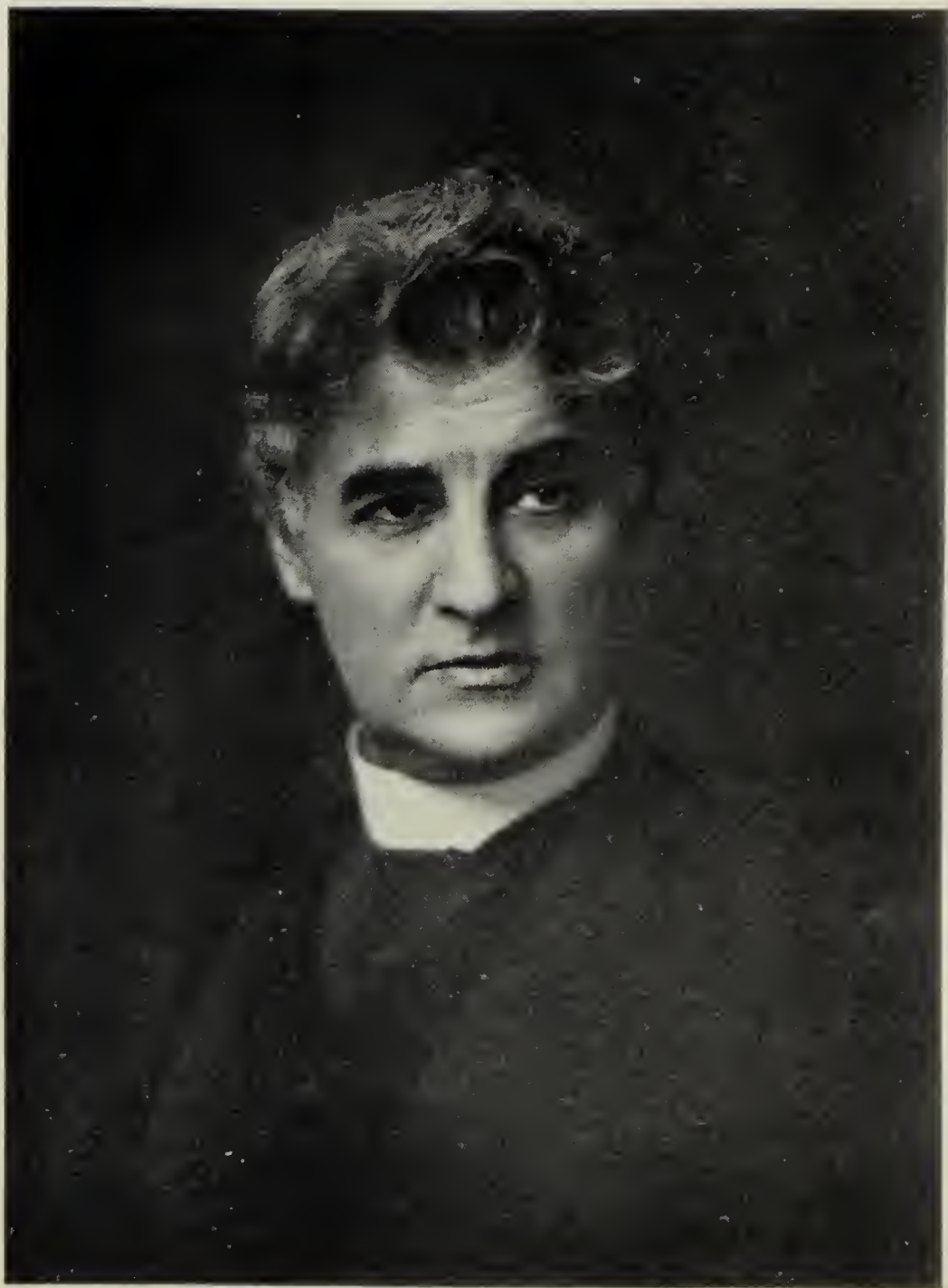
Bronson Howard was the favorite playwright of New York when I arrived there, although the growing success of young Augustus Thomas threatened his supremacy. Edward Harrigan was very popular, both as an actor and a writer, and deservedly so. The spirit of America has always seemed to me to have been best reflected by three men, who followed one another and kept alive a true spirit of the folk play, writing of men and women, of happenings and emotions of the everyday life around them: William Harrigan, Charles Hoyt and George Cohan. These three have left very deep footprints and in the case of George Cohan at least much more than that. The peculiar comedy style of all of our American playwrights of to-day was directly founded on his droll staccato and even the very modern wise-crack has descended from his careless impudence.

To me it has always been of great interest to watch



“When I first came to New York William Winter was by far the outstanding critic.”

(From a photograph taken in 1891. Courtesy of The Players)



DAVID BELASCO

“His love of the theater as an institution is, I am sure, as deep and as real as mine.”

(Photo by the Misses Colby, N. Y. From the Messmore Kendall Collection)

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how the type of writer, and the type of play changed and progressed with the change in the character and the standards of our audiences. Only the superficial observer will claim superiority in the plays of 1890 to the plays of 1910, and since 1910 we have had an almost steady growth in the art of the serious dramatist, a growth so important that beside it the smudges of filth spilled by a few unimportant scribblers may very easily be forgotten. The question of dirt in the theater in any case is no longer of any real importance. The extreme frankness of modern society, the freedom with which all sorts of questions are discussed in the home and in all walks of life, has acted as a complete disinfectant. It was an extremely easy thing to shock small coins out of a Puritan community but the man who has skill enough to successfully pander to an over-sophisticated audience usually has sense enough to use that skill to better advantage. The censor in the end will disappear, not wholly because he is no longer needed but because he will be no longer understood.

My grandfather and his family walked to church

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every Sunday because to drive on the Lord's Day was a sin. I walk four miles around a golf course every Sunday, and it is probable that my moral standards are as high as his were.

If I am sure of anything at all, I am sure that I am not my brother's keeper, and, deeply as I resent dirt for dirt's sake in the theater, I know that the way to end it is not by allowing some one person or some group of persons to set up their own moral or ethical standard and compel the rest of the world to abide by it. The professional moralist soon standardizes his own beliefs just as the professional politician does, and he never has and never can properly represent the shifting taste of the majority. Just what may properly be discussed on the stage or in society varies so greatly with the passing moods of the times that any fixed and rigid rules soon become fixed and rigid absurdities. I distinctly recall the extraordinary difficulty my mother had some forty odd years ago in delicately conveying to us the news that our old dog was soon to have an increase in her family, and in those days a female dog was called a female dog, economized

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speech being at that time considered to be of less importance than elegance.

I have studied plays all my life and I am sure I don't know enough about them to be qualified to act as a censor. I am equally sure that it would be very difficult to find any man who knows more about them than I do who would consent to act in that capacity. The temper of our people is further away to-day than it ever was before from all these laws that try to compel us all to live according to the beliefs of a handful of persons who still cling frantically to the old Puritan notion that all one has to do to abolish sin is to forbid it. The thing that should be unlawful in the theater is bad taste, and good taste is the result of education, not of restriction.

Every tendency of our American drama to-day is toward drawing a more cultivated and more sophisticated audience. The demand of this audience is for plays that mean something, and as soon as all the dramatists and all the managers who still seem to be blind to this fact are snugly relegated to the poor house we shall have no more talk of censorship. I have never

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in my life seen a dirty play that has had one-tenth as much effect upon an audience as many a fine play I could name has had, partly because the mass reaction of every audience is always healthy, and partly because fine plays are written by fine dramatists, and dirty plays are written by incompetent scribblers. The instinctive feeling that it is a fine thing to be a gentleman that comes from sitting through one performance of *JOURNEY'S END* will go much deeper under any normal skin than any dirty joke heard in an off-color musical show. If I for one moment thought that the theater had anything at all to do with forming the moral tone of a nation, I might have more patience with all this talk of political and national censorship, but I know better. The theater reflects that tone, it does not guide it.

I have the masculine man's contempt for dirty plays, arising, I suppose, from the fact that masculine men never write them. Dirty plays are always written either by women or by effeminate men, and always have been. There is, of course, a pathological reason for this, but the fact remains that the normal and

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healthy male is not especially interested in the eaves-dropping of the servants' hall, and, although he may offend by bluntness and lack of taste, he is seldom downright nasty.

I hope that no one who reads these rather rambling notes of mine will think that I have any desire to deny the woman playwright any particle of credit, but I use the word playwright as I use the word actor, to describe any one who devotes themselves to these arts, either man or woman. Sex seems rather unimportant to me beside the fact that one can act or write. Of course some of our fine plays have been written by women, and many of the greatest actors the world has ever known have been of the feminine sex. It would be difficult to name three men who ranked as actors beside Bernhardt, Duse and Charlotte Cushman, and in the theater of to-day I dare any one to make a list of five men who could stand comparison with Mrs. Fiske, Jane Cowl, Pauline Lord, Helen Hayes and Ethel Barrymore.

Through the nineties Charles Frohman produced a long line of well-made English dramas, and the Pinero

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school of expert craftsmen took the place of the writers of polite melodrama. Charles Kline brought his skill in bringing forward controversial subjects of timely interest and Clyde Fitch arrived with his box of parlor tricks. Edward Sheldon came down from Harvard with about the first authentic message and in him I have always felt the spark of the true dramatist. Eugene Walter in *THE EASIEST WAY* produced the first important American play unless some of the less widely known of the James A. Hearn plays deserve that rating. Personally I thought *MARGUERITE FLEMING* a very fine thing. But *THE EASIEST WAY* was a little after the time I have been writing of and my problem at that moment was to learn a simpler trade.

As it happens, I have lived my personal life rather away from my fellow workers of the theater, not because I haven't always valued the friendship of actors but because I have been a miser of my time. I have never been much of a club man and nothing at all of a social butterfly. I am sure that the sight of me, pushed into evening clothes by a stern wife and perspiring copiously in an effort to conceal my rage and

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rebellion, is enough to cast a pall over any social gathering. Even in Hollywood, where dinner guests may be more readily hired than anywhere else on earth, I, if I should lose my credit at my hotel, would undoubtedly starve to death. I have never even been a member of the Lambs Club and, for no other reason than that by not allowing myself to get into the habit of having anything to do but my work, I have naturally gained a good many hours.

During my time as a dramatist, during which I have written between two and three hundred plays, I have had, if we figure twelve characters to a play, somewhere around three thousand actors to play these parts. Naturally I have known all these men and women well and, as I have seen practically every drama, farce and comedy of any importance at all that has been produced during all these thirty-five years, I may claim fairly enough an acquaintance with our American players.

To me there have been a lot of good actors in the world and one mighty one—unfortunately not an American and more unfortunately already an old

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woman when I first saw her—but Sarah Bernhardt had the power to do something to me that no one else could ever do. I had no critical judgment of her at all. She spoke, and I listened and believed. Edwin Booth still seems to me to be the greatest of the others, although a long way behind the “Divine Sarah.” I saw Booth first as Hamlet during my second year at Harvard in the winter of 1890. I saw him later with Modjeska and Otis Skinner in several plays and with Lawrence Barrett the following year in *OTHELLO*. He was as simple and as true in his acting as any of our fine actors of to-day, although the method of his time was declamatory and artificial. I dimly recall the elder Salvini in some version of Dr. Bird’s *THE GLADIATOR*, but I was too young at the time to carry away any more definite impression than that he had the loudest voice I had ever heard. Jefferson had great skill and a wonderful personality and his “Rip,” the model for the Lightnin’ Bills, the Old Soaks and all of their lovable disreputable brotherhood, remains towering above them all.

Richard Mansfield I thought very like the little girl

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who had a little curl—when he was bad he was awful. In some of her parts, especially in *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW* and in a lightweight, imported comedy called *THE LOVE CHASE*, I have never seen Ada Rehan's equal. Janauscek had a real tragic power, and at her best Modjeska was superb. Just how to place Maude Adams I have never known, but I do know that she has charmed and fascinated me so often that I think it only fair to give her the credit of listing her with the great.

If no names in our theater to-day stand quite so high as these, I think it is the writer's fault rather than the actors', or possibly the fault of the audiences who have turned away from the romantic play to the grim and reticent drabness of the naturalistic drama. The glamor and the sweep of the old declamatory school naturally furnished the actor with a better chance to score than he has to-day. Then, of course, the great passions of the romances of thirty years ago find no response in our audiences. Life is quite as amazing as it ever was but by no means as mysterious. We have dissected and psychoanalyzed ourselves and one

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another past the point where we stand in awe of any one's "darkened soul" and advise calomel. Then too our audiences are different; even thirty years ago thousands of our people thought the theater a place of evil and were convinced that anything that represented romance or the glamorous was sinful. The death of this notion was a very healthy symptom and the start toward a sane understanding of life.

As any man of the world knows, the diversions usually listed as sins gained their following very largely from the free spirits who searched for forbidden things, the prescribed pleasures being of rather dubious enchantment. The fact that these stock sins are usually shabby, ugly and dull was kept a profound secret. If we could convince our young people that as a usual thing it is more fun to be decent than it is to go poking about in dark places we would make as great a step forward in our morals as we have in our drama. After all in both it's simply a case of frankness and honesty.

These were the years of the complete control of the theater by the famous syndicate, Klaw and Er-

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langer, the Frohmans, Rich and Harris, Hayman, Nixon and Zimmerman. No longer were we vagabonds and strolling players. The out of town manager who used to spend his summer standing on a corner on Fourteenth Street, where his shabby silk hat was his only office, now had his attractions booked for him by the Klaw and Erlanger Agency. The syndicate, successful from the first, soon secured control of practically all of the first class houses in the country and a once careless, slipshod business became regulated. Thanks to the syndicate and to Lee Shubert, who alone and unaided challenged this great organization to battle and fought them so stiff a draw that for years the spoils were divided between them, authors now began to eat as regularly as ordinary mortals, and the high-powered motor cars so common to playwrights to-day can trace their being to this source.

There is no doubt at all that these two great forces in the theater are responsible for making a business of what had before their time been a sort of gypsy's occupation, but unfortunately the fates are rarely prodigal and the men gifted with the ability to organize

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an art have never yet known what to do with it after it is organized. They always remind me of the cowboy who fought the bear and after getting him down had to call for help because he was afraid to let go. As a matter of fact I have wondered of late if there wasn't such a thing as being too successful in organization. I have given a lot of time to the welding together of our Dramatists' Guild, just as many other playwrights have, and now we are extremely well organized, with nobody to fight.

The Actors' Equity is all powerful after years of honest effort, but more actors are out of work than ever before. It's a fine thing for the actor and the writer to be able to enforce fair conditions of employment, but unfortunately we can't force the employment itself. A good job under fair conditions is a great thing, but no job at all isn't so good. It may be worth a thought in passing that if we of the two creative groups in the theater had been as active in working for the theater itself as we were in fighting for the power of our individual groups, we might at this writing be better off. Even yet we might, by a

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sacrifice of some of the power we have gained, help to bring back strength to the business that must flourish if we are to flourish. We need have no fear of the old tyrannies; they have gone forever. When actors and authors meet their old antagonists, the managers, to-day, they meet on equal ground and, as my old comrade Gene Buck puts it: "All false whiskers are off, and everybody comes out from behind the bushes."

The complete control of the drama in America by the business men of the theater started at about the time I entered the lists and continued for about twenty years. Under their rule prosperity came to us and lasted up to the time when the public became tired of a drama that soon became a factory product, as was the natural result of a system that put the business man in control of the creative artist. I have seen this happen so many times, in so many forms of the amusement business, that it has grown to be an old story to me.

I am old enough to remember the group of managers who were the leading producers just before the

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time of the "syndicate" and I know the difference in their methods and ideals. Daly, A. M. Palmer, Daniel and Charles Frohman, and the great stars like Booth, Jefferson, Modjeska, Fannie Davenport and a few others had a real following both in New York and on the road; each one of them represented something. The public knew what to expect if they went to Daly's Theatre, or to Daniel Frohman's Lyceum on Fourth Avenue, just as they knew what to expect of Edwin Booth or Joe Jefferson. If A. M. Palmer made a production one knew very well the sort of entertainment that would be offered. From Hoyt or from Harrigan you knew the type of play that would be presented and took it or left it as your taste decided.

After the rise to power of the "syndicate" Charles Frohman kept close to a definite standard, but Booth, Jefferson, Hoyt, Palmer, Harrigan and Daly were gone, and in their places rose up a new crop of managers, men of my time, most of them friends of mine, who were more or less timidly knocking at the door at about the time I was trying to break in. Sam Harris, when I first knew him, was Terry McGovern's

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manager; Al Woods was an advance agent ahead of a sensational melodrama and known as the best man in the show business to draw a big opening to a bad play. Archie Selwyn was an office boy for a firm of play-brokers. Edgar Selwyn was trying to get a start as an actor and often reminds me of the fact that when I was casting my first play he came to me for a job and was met by a very cold reception. If Mr. Selwyn is telling the truth about this, as he probably is, although I can't in the least recall the incident, it goes to show that I still had a lot to learn, because he was a very good actor, much better, I am sure, than any one I chose above him.

These young men came into the theater and took important places in it and rode to fortune on the wave of prosperity that was at its height during these years. They were joined in time by a younger group, the Theatre Guild, Arthur Hopkins, and later still Jed Harris, all of whom had as definite a thing to say as the old group of managers a full generation before them. In saying it they started the change in popular taste that meant the end of the commercial theater,

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and the birth of what before long will be a theater of taste and intelligence. Men like George Tyler, Dillingham, Winthrop Ames, Ziegfeld and William A. Brady had gone on producing their particular type of play and keeping a little apart from the rest. Way back, however, in 1898, all managers were mighty men in my eyes, and the least of them was sacred.

CHAPTER IV / "HOLD, VILLAIN"

GUS HILL and I, started so prosperously with THROUGH THE BREAKERS, kept up a very pleasant association for several seasons, and whenever I meet him now after the passing of more than twenty-five years I am conscious of a feeling of good will and something that is almost affection. I wrote several plays for him and one of them, LOST IN THE DESERT, brought about my meeting with Elizabeth Breyer, a young actress who had been playing with E. H. Sothern. I with some difficulty persuaded her to become a member of the LOST IN THE DESERT company, and a few months later and with much more difficulty persuaded her to become a member of the Davis family. The last engagement has lasted some twenty-five years longer than the first and has been much more successful.

LOST IN THE DESERT was to have been a challenge thrown by Mr. Hill and me straight in the face of

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Augustin Daly, Belasco and Charles Frohman. We had made a lot of money with *THROUGH THE BREAKERS* and one or two other plays and saw no reason why we shouldn't spend it. We built a wonderful production, hired a band of Arab acrobats, trained four horses, engaged a fine cast and worked very hard, but although the play wasn't a failure it never made any money and in the end we lost our investment.

During the season in which Mr. Hill and I produced *LOST IN THE DESERT* which was, I think, my third year as a writer of sensational melodramas, I had played Syracuse and met Sam, Lee, and Jake Shubert, who had not at that time invaded New York but were in control of theaters in Syracuse, Rochester and Utica. They were boys at that time. I was twenty-six and Lee, the oldest of the Shuberts, was at least two years younger. Sam was a man of picturesque and colorful personality and had a real taste for the theater but I always thought the great success of these young men was due to Lee. He himself gave all the glory to his younger brother whose tragic death, however, forced him to come out as the head of the firm.

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Lee Shubert is a strong and absolutely fearless man, not a lover of the theater as David Belasco is but a business man who plays with theaters and plays, with authors and actors as pawns in a game of high finance. His influence in the theater has been very great and no one who knows the story of his fight against Klaw and Erlanger and their powerful associates can fairly withhold real admiration for his courage and energy.

During the week my play was at the Bastable Theatre in Syracuse, Lee Shubert persuaded me to sign a contract taking over the Baker Theatre, Rochester, for a season of summer stock. I eagerly fell for his idea as I was hungry for the experience and knew that it would be of great benefit to me. I have always been curious to see the inside workings of every branch of the theatrical business and in the years since then I doubt if there is any ramification of the game in which I have not had a finger, sometimes a burned finger, but always an eager one.

I signed this contract and engaged a company in New York before I started on a western tour with *LOST IN THE DESERT*. Unfortunately, however, before

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the date of the Rochester opening came round, my share of the losses on *LOST IN THE DESERT* had so eaten up my profits on *THROUGH THE BREAKERS* that I arrived in Rochester with no assets beyond a perfectly good wife and fifty-four dollars in cash to meet fifteen trusting actors who were to depend upon me for their living for the next twenty weeks.

Details are apt to escape one's mind after twenty-five years, but I have some hazy recollection of having been rather up against it there in Rochester. My books, however, prove that I opened the season with *THE FATAL CALL*—loss five hundred and two dollars—and followed with *THE TWO ORPHANS*—loss three hundred and six dollars. I can't help wishing those books of mine told me how I did it.

One memory, however, is very clear. The play for the third week arrived from the play brokers, C.O.D., two hundred dollars, and lay in the express office as safe from me as it is ever possible for any play to be. I was quite at the end of my string and had no possible avenue of escape. That day, after the matinée of *THE TWO ORPHANS*, I said a polite good day to the

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deputy sheriff who seemed to have taken a great fancy to my private chair in the theater's box office and started walking the streets trying to think of some possible means of keeping my company together. In my walk I passed a second hand book store and my eye caught the title of a ragged old volume in the tray marked "ten cents"—UNDER TWO FLAGS. This cross marks the spot where I started a trick of high pressure play writing, a trick which of course I put sternly behind me long years ago, although I have never been able to convince many people of my reformation. In any case Owen Davis' Baker Theatre Stock Company opened five days later in a dramatization of UNDER TWO FLAGS and played for four weeks—profit \$10,250 (by the book).

For four years I ran this company in Rochester every summer and during that time, in partnership with the Shuberts, took over houses in Syracuse, Utica, Brooklyn and Philadelphia. They were busy years. In Rochester I was company manager, stage director, press agent, head box office boy and whenever business got bad I'd write the next week's play to save paying for one.

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During all this time Mrs. Davis was a member of the company and adored by the Rochester audiences. She might have had a brilliant career in the theater if she had chosen to stick to it instead of devoting her life to "her men" as she has always called us, "her men" being myself and our sons, Donald and Owen, Jr. For a long time I am afraid she found it very hard to give up the work she loved but I am sure she is well rewarded for her sacrifice now in the excitement and joy of seeing these two boys climbing so sturdily ahead on the path she knows so well—an unusual experience for a mother—not only to have hope and faith in her sons but to know exactly what each step they take means and where they are going.

During the following five years we divided our time between these stock companies in the summer and New York in the winter. In those five years I wrote thirty-eight melodramas, two farces, a number of vaudeville acts and burlesque pieces and one big show for the Hippodrome, as well as picking up any other little job that came to hand.

It was during this time I wrote my first play for

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Sam Harris, then a member of the firm of Sullivan, Harris and Woods, and started a friendship that has lasted ever since. A little later Al Woods sent for me and told me he was leaving the firm and was about to set up for himself. Our interview ended in the drawing of the most remarkable contract ever made between a manager and an author. By its terms Woods was to produce not less than four new plays, and after the first year, four old ones each season for five years. During that time I could not write for any other manager and he could not produce a play written by any other author. During the five years Mr. Woods produced fifty odd plays of mine but we both of us cheated shamefully on the other part of our agreement. We produced a number of plays by the late Theodore Kramer and I sneaked a few over with other popular-priced managers of the day.

Woods was, and is, a remarkable man, a great showman and a man of humorous and philosophic nature. His outstanding characteristic is, to me, that if he loves a play he knows how to produce it. If he tries to do a play he doesn't love he knows nothing about it and

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cares less. He has but two opinions of a play when he reads it, "Swell" or "It don't appeal to me," and when he plays his hunch he's very apt to succeed. This instinctive feel for values is one of the greatest assets in the equipment of the theatrical manager and Al Woods and William A. Brady have more of it than any other men of my time. It is a pure instinct, quite apart from any critical faculty and is emotional rather than the result of any reasoning.

David Belasco, a great showman, always seemed to me to see in a play manuscript the thing it would develop into under his guidance, but Woods and Brady sense an audience's response to certain sorts of melodramatic situations and when they play their instinct and not their judgment they usually are right.

The first play under my contract with Woods was *THE CONFESSIONS OF A WIFE*, which really wasn't nearly so dreadful as it sounds. The second was *THE GAMBLER OF THE WEST*, probably the best popular-priced melodrama produced during these years. Then came *CONVICT 999*, *CHINATOWN CHARLIE* and the famous *NELLIE*, *THE BEAUTIFUL CLOAK MODEL*.

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During my time with Al Woods, one of our most unusual experiences was with a melodrama called *THE MARKED WOMAN* and only a day or two ago, when I dropped into Mr. Woods' office for a friendly chat, Martin Herman, Mr. Woods' brother and general manager, gravely brought us in a contract, yellow with age, to remind us of an absurd but to us at the time a perfectly normal activity. In those days everything was fish that came to our net. If a particularly horrible murder excited the public, we had it dramatized and on the stage usually before any one knew who had been guilty of the crime. Frequently I have had a job of hasty re-writing when it became evident that my chosen culprit from real life was an innocent and perfectly respectable citizen.

I went into the Woods office one day about twenty-five years ago and noticed a well-dressed and well-mannered young Chinaman patiently seated in a chair in the waiting room. I asked Martin Herman what he wanted and Martin replied that he was crazy and that Al couldn't be bothered with him. Later in the day, however, Oriental patience conquered and as a

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result I was called into conference with Mr. Woods and this well-mannered Chinaman.

With some difficulty Woods and I were made to understand that our friend from the Orient was the custodian of a very large sum of real money which he wanted to devote to the cause of the Liberal Party in China. These were the days of the old Empress and the Republican Party was just beginning to be heard from. Part of their activity was to arouse in America an antagonism toward the late Empress Dowager and I was asked to write and Mr. Woods to produce a play in which the poor old lady would be shown up as a sort of composite picture of all the evil characters of history. Woods and I had never met any Empresses at the time—although at this writing I understand Mr. Woods is in the habit of hobnobbing with all the crowned heads of Europe—but as there was no doubt at all of the money being both real and plentiful we swallowed our scruples, if we had any, and what I did to the old Empress of China I shudder to recall.

When I finished the play and took it to Woods,

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he said it was a whale, although I myself had some doubts of its merit. Our Chinese angel, by now reënforced by a committee of his fellow countrymen, said it was without doubt a mighty drama and their only suggestion was that they would like to see a scene put in where the Empress poisoned a child. I sternly refused to surrender the integrity of my script, although I made some small concessions in the nature of arson and murder and *THE MARKED WOMAN* was ready for production.

The popular-priced circuit never had seen such a lavish display—please remember that all bills were paid by the Republican Party of China—costumes had been sent us from Peking, the duty alone on which was many times more than any play had ever cost us. To this day my wife has several gorgeous Chinese robes, her only graft in all these years.

THE MARKED WOMAN, to my surprise, was a great success from the first, although Edward E. Rose, who staged it, and I were not quite satisfied with the last act and determined to improve it. About three weeks after the opening, Mr. Rose and I jumped out to Eliza-

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beth, New Jersey, where the company was playing, and watched a matinée performance. As soon as the final curtain fell we rushed back stage and called the company for rehearsal. I seated myself at a table with a pad of paper and threw the sheets at Ed Rose as I filled them while he forced the lines into the poor actors' heads and re-grouped and re-staged the scenes. The result was that we played that night, only three hours later, the last act for our second act and the second act for our last. This was, I am confident, about as complete a job of revision as was ever accomplished between a matinée and a night.

All went well with *THE MARKED WOMAN* for some time but one day our Chinese backers called on Mr. Woods and told him that the play must close at once. Mr. Woods, who had a hit on his hands, smiled pleasantly and asked the reason and was told that the most powerful of the Chinese Tongs had threatened to kill our friends if the play was performed after one more week. Mr. Woods expressed great sympathy but said he was sorry but his duty to me, the author, prevented him from doing as they requested. The next day the

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gentlemen returned to say that the Tong had informed them that they had slightly altered their plan and now proposed if the play continued to kill Mr. Woods. Al said that it was a lousy play anyway and he had never liked it, but a statement from Pittsburgh showing a big profit calmed him sufficiently to enable him to defy the Tongs to do their worst.

The next day letters with death heads began to arrive and as these failed to ruffle his majestic calm a voice, speaking broken English, called him on the telephone and informed him that if the play was performed even once after the following Saturday night his body would be found in the East River the following Monday. As Mr. Woods' body is still to be found comfortably seated in his office at the Eltinge Theatre, it is not difficult to deduct his reaction to that voice—we closed.

For eight years the Stair and Havlin Circuit, as the string of popular-priced theaters that extended across the United States was called, were amazingly prosperous and in their rise, their prosperity and their decline, I should like to trace an analogy between them

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and the motion picture industry of the present day—in the nature of a warning and a prophecy.

During the eight years of which I am writing the average business of these theaters was definitely fixed at about three thousand five hundred dollars a week. The fluctuations of business were nominal, the people wanted our shows, just as to-day there is a fixed demand for talking pictures, not for a good picture, although already one may see evidences of discrimination on the part of the public which, I fear, the picture companies are no more prepared to gratify than we of the old popular-priced theater were in our day. All we had to do was to see that our weekly running expense came to five hundred dollars less than our share of the take—then multiply this by forty, as the houses were open forty weeks a year, and we had a profit of twenty thousand a year from each show.

During each of these years we had from seven to thirteen plays of my writing on this circuit.

Then one day—and let me call the attention of the rulers of the motion picture business to this—Mr. Woods and I were struck by a great notion. “We



ELIZABETH DREYER

“And a few months later and with much more difficulty persuaded her to become a member of the Davis family.”



LAURETTE TAYLOR

"One of the best soubrettes I ever saw."

*(Photograph by Ira L. Hill. From the Messmore Kendall
Collection)*

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will," we said, "increase this average business of \$3,500 by putting out a show so much bigger than any of the others that we can safely count on over-capacity business to pay our increased expense and yield us a greater than average profit."

No sooner said than done. NELLIE, THE BEAUTIFUL CLOAK MODEL took to the road and played for a year to an average of four thousand dollars a week. What could be more natural than to continue the good work? The next season we put out three more "big shows" and allowed them to cost us about thirty percent more than our old average of expense. By this time our rivals, attracted by the reports of our big business with our "Super-Specials" began to compete for this added revenue and produced a flock of "Super-Specials" which in a season, since all things are comparative, educated the public to expect "big shows." Thus, the average show now costs a sum of money that could only be drawn by an extraordinary show, and in three years the popular-priced theater business was dead.

Naturally, the advance of the pictures had some-

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thing to do with our defeat, but neither then nor now can the decline of the theater be fairly laid to the fact that the public prefers the motion picture to the drama. All of the ills of the theater in my time are due directly to the folly, the ignorance and the greed of the theatrical manager. I have many life-long friends among these men; among them are men of fine principle and honest intentions, but the composite manager has always been the stumbling block in the way of our progress. We tried to fight the advancing wave of motion pictures with dirty, ill-lighted theaters, bad-mannered attendants and arrogant box-office men, and we lost, as we deserved to lose.

There is a popular idea that the theatrical manager failed at his job because he allowed his artistic soul to overwhelm his natural business instincts. In my humble opinion he failed because he usually had no artistic soul at all and no business instincts. I know of about five managers of the last decade who were what I would call business men, and I am prepared to offer a silver cup for the names of any others.

The arrogance of the old-time manager, to whom

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actors and authors were slaves and chattels, has gone, and although I was one of those who fought for their passing I have not as yet become reconciled to their substitutes. The best men of to-day are still the men who were the best of the old order and if some of their old power is gone I can't help feeling that with it went much of the old glamour and romance of the theater.

This writing rubber stamp stories by formula was the main cause of the collapse of the Stair and Havlyn Circuit and is the only real reason for to-day's depression in the New York theater. There is always an audience for a good play, but unfortunately there isn't always a good play for an audience. Just as every good play produced stimulates theatergoing, so does every bad play produced discourage it, and when the bad plays outnumber the good by too great a proportion the public naturally becomes very cautious. We figure of late in the theater that only one play out of seven produced is even moderately successful, which when you come to think of it isn't so much the public's lack of interest as it is the playwright's lack of skill.

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When a man has spent time and money to see six terrible plays one after the other it isn't surprising that his eagerness is somewhat cooled. If it were possible to bring into New York this season fifteen fine plays we should hear no more talk about hard times in the theater. Unfortunately it isn't possible.

Under the present conditions the demand for good plays has little effect upon the supply partly because good plays are hard to write and even more because we are not in agreement as to what constitutes a good play.

The novelist often succeeds upon his literary style, a painter by his drawing and his sense of color, but paradoxically enough a good play is a bad play unless the writer has been fortunate in the choice of his subject matter; skill alone won't save him. Since the only real standard by which one may judge a play is the rather primitive one of whether one likes it or not, it is easy to see how dangerous a game this play writing is. A good workman may work his heart out for many months to be condemned at last by the same feeling that gave birth to the old doggerel "I do not like you, Doctor Fell."

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Few critics are clever enough to make the distinction between a writer's skill and his good or evil fortune in the choice of his subject, and I am often amused to read the praises of the genius of an author who has been lucky enough to hit upon a theme or story that has tickled the public's fancy and the complete damnation of the poor wretch who has failed to do so, although in every other particular the later play may be ten times as well built and well written as the former. Naturally we like to be amused and resent being bored. Yet, as a matter of truth, the same skill, the same hard work and the same knowledge of life and of play structure goes into a man's failures as he puts into his successes. The writer who knows his trade fails or triumphs the hour he makes his decision of what he is going to write about. Then, too, the subject matter of plays is still far too often dictated by the manager and between us we are still getting ourselves into trouble trying to guess what the public wants instead of trying to do the best work we know how to do and letting it go at that. The old notion that the experienced showman knows more

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about plays than our present public knows dies hard and many of our plays are still being written by and for an intelligence distinctly below the average intelligence of the audience.

The day of the routine comedy-drama and melodrama is over. The successful play of to-day is nine times out of ten a good play. In fact the most encouraging thing about the theater to-day is not that good plays are sure of success but that bad plays are sure of failure. An optimist may look happily forward to the time when writers and managers who remain blind to the change in public taste and persist in producing routine sugar-coated piffle will all have starved to death or been driven out of the business.

This change has come about very gradually, as immigration has been restricted and the living standards of the American people have advanced. Life to-day is stimulating where once it was, at least for the majority, dull and uneventful. Romance, once supplied almost wholly by the theater, is all about us. Modern thought, modern invention, have done much to end the bland acceptance of routine fiction, both on the

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stage and on the printed page, and to be sure of an audience to-day one must have something to say and know how to say it.

Of course, I am writing now of twenty years ago but even then the change was coming and in a way I was alive to it. I am, at this point, quite willing to admit that I frequently turn out work far beneath the standard that my observation tells me is necessary for success, and that to-morrow I am quite as apt to start frantically at work on an untrue and obsolete theme as any novice. There are writers who are under the control of their own critical faculty, but unfortunately for me I have never been one of them. A story pops into my head. Often I know it has no importance at all and sternly shut it out. But, as is often the case, if the story keeps coming back of its own free will I usually end by forgiving it its obvious faults and gradually working myself up into a lather of paternal pride. . . . Who ever saw a young mother whose baby didn't seem remarkable to her? These yarns of mine seem good to me because they are mine. If any one else was to ask my opinion of the same story I

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would say it was terrible, but by the time I have lived with it for a month or so I see beauty in it, because I am looking at it hoping to see that beauty.

As a matter of fact, one of the greatest differences between a good play and a bad one is that a good play says what the writer thinks it says, while a bad one doesn't. Play writing is really an extraordinary difficult art; if all that was necessary for an emotion to reach an audience was for the writer to feel that emotion, we would have few failures. It is quite possible for a writer to be honestly affected by the sorrows of a character without the audience in the least sharing his feeling. I have often wept as I wrote a scene that never in the least affected any one besides myself. I have chuckled over many a farce situation that never got a laugh. A playwright's words and his situations must have that strange power that will project them over the footlights. This projecting force is made up of instinct, experience, sincerity and a queer sense of rhythm, the timing of the dramatist.

When I am asked how much play writing may be taught I always hesitate. A lot may be taught—to

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the right person—very little to the one without the instinctive ear—the sense of pace and build that must be there, although just exactly what it is and where it comes from I find it difficult to explain.

I dug up recently, out of my files, one of the first plays I ever wrote, and was amazed at its crudity, but even more amazed by the lilt of it; its pace, its timing and its gradual accumulation to its crescendo were as deft and as sure as anything I could write to-day . . . and at the time I wrote it these things were entirely instinctive. One may learn a lot about what not to write, may learn much of literary style and taste and many of the tricks of construction, but I doubt if any one without the instinctive feel of the born dramatist can learn how to time a speech or pitch a climax and without this all the rest is useless.

Many of the greatest novelists, both of the past and the present, have failed utterly when they tried to write for the theater. Often they were far better writers than any dramatist I know. They knew as much about moods and character as any of us—but their words won't play, no one can act their scenes.

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Few persons realize how vital this instinctive timing is to a play. Bartley Campbell, a dramatist of the old school, was a master of it. His old drama, *THE WHITE SLAVE*, was quite as lyric as any song. The late Charles Kline could time a climax so deftly that, although "the big scene" of *THE LION AND THE MOUSE* hardly makes sense when you read the words, it was impossible not to be thrilled by them when you heard them spoken.

The writer of the old school was more dependent upon this instinctive timing than the writer of to-day, but even now the man or woman who writes for the theater must write "good theater" no matter how sound may be his philosophy. Instinct and emotion will, I think, always be more vital to success than literary style or even good sense and logic.

To-day a writer must avoid the conventions just as yesterday he had to abide by them, and in this difference lies the distinction between the old school and the new. In the days of which I am writing, the characters of our popular-priced plays were as sturdily founded upon a conventional mold as the most dog-

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matic creed of the most narrow-minded religious fanatics of the day, and any stepping aside upon a more flowery path was sternly frowned upon. The good play maker of the popular-priced theater was supposed to know what a proper list of characters for a play must be and any departure from that accepted list was taken as a sign of the bad workman.

In my day the list ran as follows:

I. HERO.

The hero was either poor or else very young and very drunk. If sober and wealthy he automatically became a villain. Wild young men with wealthy fathers might do in a pinch—they could be reformed by the heroine in the third act, and in this lady's company, in the last act, they could receive the father's blessing and the keys to the cellar, or whatever best represented the family fortune. I was, however, never very strong for the rich young man type of hero, well knowing how much closer to the hearts of the audience the honest working man type was sure to be. Brave this hero must always be, and strong and kind,

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but it was unfortunately difficult for him to be wise, as the burden of troubles it was necessary to load upon this poor man's shoulders, by way of dramatic suspense, would never have been carried by any one but a terrible sap.

2. HEROINE.

If the hero was extremely poor, it was possible for her to be extremely wealthy, but by far the safest bet was to make her the daughter of an honest working man. In these days the young girls who went to the popular-priced theaters were not themselves employed to any extent as clerks or stenographers, and they knew more about factory life and the experience of the day laborer and less about the white collar workers than they know to-day. Our heroine must be pure at any cost, or else she must die. There could be no temporizing with the "the wages of sin are death" slogan. In all my experience I never once saw it successfully defied. The heroine must, of course, always marry the hero. Our audiences would not stand for any but a happy ending with love and wealth bestowed upon

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the girl. This was bad art, but it always seemed to me to be pretty good sense, as the theater to them meant not life as it was but life as they wanted it to be, and the young girl in our audiences who thrilled for an hour over the wealth and luxury and the ideal love that always came to the fictitious character she had for a time exchanged places with had little chance of remaining in this fairyland for long.

3. THE HEAVY MAN.

Always wealthy; the silk hat was his badge of office. In a good melodrama he never reformed, he bit the dust. He was the most absurd thing connected with these old plays. The necessity for his evil plotting was so great that even the most innocent of audiences must have frequently wondered why he was not poisoned at an early age by his own unfortunate disposition. As a matter of fact, one of the principal causes of the death of this form of entertainment was the "Desperate Desmond" cartoons that instructed our public in the absurdity of this stock character.

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4. THE HEAVY WOMAN.

There were two of her, the haughty lady of wealth and social position, quite naturally the instinctive enemy of our audiences, and the "bad woman" who in these days was spoken of in a hushed whisper. I recall some successful heavy women who had dark hair, but these were always cast in the society women parts. The real bad ones had to be blondes and they averaged a good hundred and sixty pounds.

5. THE SOUBRETTE.

A working girl with bad manners and a good heart. Laurette Taylor was one of the best of these I ever saw. This type of part, the real soubrette, has disappeared from our theater, and yet some of the best actresses I have ever known were soubrettes,—Maggie Mitchell, Minnie Palmer, Mrs. Fiske (when she was Minnie Maddern) and a host of others.

6. THE COMEDIAN.

Either Jew, Irish or German, the most important member of the company in the old days and the one

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who drew the largest salary. We might and, as a matter of fact, we frequently did get away with a terrible leading man, but the comedian had to be good.

7. THE LIGHT COMEDY BOY.

This character was always a humble and faithful friend of the lovers and was always in love with the soubrette. I recall once trying to have this character in love with some one else—but I had to rewrite the play. The audience got too bewildered.

8. THE SECOND HEAVY.

He was just a bum, a tool of the villain's, and as it was usual to kill him along toward the middle of the second act, we never found it necessary to engage a very good actor.

These eight made up the cast and to them we added two or three utility actors to play such "walking parts" as the plot demanded, but no matter what the play these eight characters were always in it. If they hadn't been I am sure the audience would have demanded their money back.

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Scenically, these plays of ours were very elaborate. They were always in four acts and frequently with as many as five scenes in each act. CHINATOWN CHARLIE had twenty-two scenes. The mechanical dexterity demanded in writing a play of this kind was very important and an extremely difficult trick to acquire. Front scenes in the old melodramas were always flat and stupid, just as they are in the musical comedies of to-day. The expert workman let his front scenes run the exact time it took the stage carpenters to set the next scene back of it and not a moment longer, which took experience and care. It was also necessary to climax these scenes and these scene climaxes were the forerunners of the modern "blackout"—some sure-fire "belly-laugh" or bit of heroic bunk that would be sure to bring a yell of delight from the audience to cover the moment in the dark necessary to fly the drop and start the next scene.

After a time I got to be so expert in this that I could give a cue to the audience for a laugh or a yell of approval that would last just long enough to fill in the desired pause. To me the most interesting thing

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about these old manuscripts of mine are these “audience cues” that would be meaningless to any one who should chance to read them but were a very real and very necessary part of the play.

Just how I could have been quite serious in building these old plays I can't at this moment quite comprehend, but the fact is that I was, just as every man who is successful in his work must be. Even the priceless line of Nellie, the well-known cloak model, was quite gravely written. Nellie was endeavoring to escape from the attentions of a very evil gentleman who from the start of the play showed signs of paying her attentions that were far from honorable. In the first act he pushed her under a descending elevator in the basement of a department store. In Act II he threw her off Brooklyn Bridge and in the third he bound her to the tracks of the elevated railroad just as a train came thundering along. In the fourth act he climbs in her bedroom window at an early hour of the morning and when both modesty and prudence force her to shrink away from him he looked at her reproachfully and said: “Why do you fear me, Nellie?”

CHAPTER V / UP FROM MELODRAMA

ABOUT 1911 I saw the fate of the popular-priced game, and got out of it before the final crash, as did Sam Harris, Al Woods and a few of the others. I started to look about for a new way of earning my living. I had made money at the game and was in no danger from that source, but I was then, in 1910, only thirty-seven years old and had trained myself to the habit of almost constant work, a habit I have never as yet been able to break.

My name, as the author of literally hundreds of bloodthirsty melodramas, was a thing of scorn to the highbrows of the theater, used as a horrible example to young authors and to frighten bad children. The very thought of my being allowed to produce a play in a Broadway theater was quite absurd, as my friends all assured me. I kept on writing, however, for the same reason that keeps me at it now, because I love

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to write plays, no matter whom it hurts. For a year or two I had a tough time, but I managed to find a market among the road stars and the one night stand companies, and I wrote a few comedies and dramatized several novels. They were successful enough in the towns where they were played but were never heard of in New York. At this time, also, I developed a trick of writing plays directly for stock companies and by good salesmanship built up quite an income from this by-product. I was absolutely bound to break into the New York game and in spite of many rebuffs I kept knocking at the doors of the New York managers.

The doors of New York managers, however, were closely guarded, even in the comparatively far-off days of which I am writing, and in the season of 1910 the best I could manage to do, aside from my usual flock of road shows and my growing list of plays popular with the stock companies at that time successfully scattered all over the country, was to secure a couple of matinée performances. As a matter of fact, a matinée performance of the play of a new author is simply a

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public announcement by the manager of his lack of faith and neither of these efforts of mine came to much. The first of these, *THE WISHING RING*, was produced by Lee Shubert at Daly's with Marguerite Clark and a supporting company thrown together from the cast of a musical play at that time current in the theater. Marguerite Clark was charming in the part and later made use of the play on the road and produced it for a short run in Chicago. *THE WISHING RING* was directed by Cecil De Mille and was, I think, the last thing he did before he left New York and threw in his lot with the picture people.

The second of these half-hearted matinée productions was made for me by Daniel Frohman at the Lyceum and gave Laurette Taylor one of her first chances to show her very extraordinary talent. This play, *LOLA*, was a queer sort of fish, part crude melodrama and part a very real and very fine example of good play writing, but it was one of those plays of which one must say it is either great or absurd. My shady reputation and the hasty and careless production made only one answer probable. In fact, it was

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many years before the name of Owen Davis was much of a help to a play, and it would probably have taken me at least a thousand to establish a trade-mark as a serious dramatist had the public known that aside from the crimes committed under the name of Owen Davis I must also answer to many others. I had fallen into the playful habit of inventing other names to hide my evil deeds. At one time I used so many assumed names that the mere invention of them became a task and Al Woods used to help me out by calmly borrowing the name of one of his clerks or stenographers and writing it down as author of my latest thriller.

When *CONVICT 999* was first produced in Pittsburgh, the dramatic critic of the largest of the morning papers said in his review of the play: "Here at last is a fine melodrama and heaven be praised. Here, in the person of John Oliver, a new writer, we have at last found a man who knows more about how to write a play of this kind than the irrepressible Owen Davis ever knew."

William A. Brady was the first to give me a regular

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Broadway production with a first class company and in doing so, although he little knew it at the time, he started an association that lasted for many years. Mr. Brady is a strong man and had he been able to foresee what was in store for him the day on which we signed our first contract, it is highly probable these confessions would never have been written. With great confidence, however, Mr. Brady commanded me to write him a big melodrama and as a result Doris Keane and William Courtney appeared in a direful thing called *MAKING GOOD*. The title of this play turned out to be a god-send to the New York critics and if I had put as much wit into my play as they put into their slaughter of it, Mr. Brady and I would have been happier even if they had been deprived of a great pleasure. As a matter of fact, I should be a very popular man with the critics. Several of them owe their standing as humorists almost entirely to me and at least one of the finest of them, Frank O'Malley, won his place in the ranks of humorists over my dead body.

In later years Mr. O'Malley confided to me that he

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often journeyed miles to get to a play of mine, a compliment that at the time I quite failed to value at its true worth.

Twenty-four hours after the first New York production of *MAKING GOOD* I was safely hidden in the country with my still loyal wife and two small sons, luckily at the time too young to know their shame. At once I started out, quite undismayed, to write another. One old habit that still clings to me: if I have a failure, to sit down at my desk before I have so much as slept on it, and write at least part of the next one; as a matter of fact, most of the good plays I have written have been started at such a time. Here then, in the wilds of Westchester, I stuck to it until I finished *THE FAMILY CUPBOARD*, much the best thing I had done up to then, and a play that might very well be a success if produced to-day. The manuscript of this play I sent at once to a play-broker with instructions to offer it for production with no author's name on the manuscript. A few days later the broker called me up with the startling information that he had sold my play to William A. Brady—rather dread news as,

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following what the New York critics had said about MAKING GOOD, Mr. Brady had thrown me out of his office and practically forbidden me its sacred ground.

It seemed, so my broker said, that Mr. Brady had paid good money for an option on the play and was very curious as to the identity of the modest author. When he learned it, he had something very like a stroke, but in time he forgave me.

All the years I worked with Mr. Brady were punctuated by terrible fights between us that always ended in a renewal of friendship and affection. He is by far the most colorful figure in the American theater and even when one disagrees with him, which is apt to be rather often, his strength and his complete belief in his own opinion cause his opponents awful moments of doubt. If Mr. Brady really set out to convince me that a red apple was a yellow one, I should at once go and order a new pair of glasses.

Mr. Brady, David Belasco and Daniel Frohman are the last of the old guard and, each in his different way, has written his name boldly on the pages of our drama. Different as these three men are they have one thing

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in common: a great and abiding love of the theater and its people.

Mr. Brady and I together did *THE FAMILY CUPBOARD*, *SINNERS*, *FOREVER AFTER*, *AT 9.45* and many others. *FOREVER AFTER* was Alice Brady's first big part; partly owing to its simple, straightforward love story and partly to her fine performance, it turned out to be one of the best money-makers I have ever had. These plays were at the moment my idea of one step up from the *NELLIE*, *THE BEAUTIFUL CLOAK* *MODELS* of the Al Woods days.

At about this time the Actors' Equity Association was formed and pulled a real battle for their rights against the absurd and vicious standards of the business. That they won that battle is well-known and that they deserved to win it is fully admitted by fair-minded and honest managers of the Sam Harris type—although, of course, if all managers had been of his type no fight would have been necessary.

The actors' strike at this time closed all the theaters and, as usual, the author, who wasn't in the fight at all and had nothing to win whatever the outcome, lost

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much more money than any actor and rather resented the row being pulled in his front yard. Most authors were in sympathy with the actors but I know that for one I wished they had chosen to fight with some other weapons than my three plays, the runs of which were interrupted and from which I had been drawing a very considerable royalty.

Hit in the dramatist's tenderest spot, we met and organized and from that day to this many of my hours have been given up to service to the authors' societies. I was at that time the last president of the old Society of American Dramatists and Composers and a member of the Authors' League. With the help of a handful of ardent spirits, I brought all the active dramatists of the day into the old society and merged it with the Authors' League as the Dramatists' Guild of the Authors' League of America. A group of strong men and women came to the front and served faithfully on hundreds of committees and through long hours of conferences. Among the most active of these were Augustus Thomas, James Forbes, Gene Buck, Rupert Hughes, Channing Pollock, Edward Childs Carpen-

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ter, Percival Wilde, Rachel Crothers, Ann Crawford Flexner, Jules Goodman and Montague Glass; then later Arthur Richman, George Middleton and William Cary Duncan and a number of others.

I remained as president of this group until I resigned to take up the presidency of the Authors' League and gave, as all these others gave, a very considerable part of my life for many years. At present, thanks to our efforts, the dramatists are as well organized as the actors and like the actor eager at all times for a battle, but we are unfortunately quite without an adversary, one of the peculiar things about the manager being that he is unable to agree to anything whatever that any other manager thinks would be a good thing.

At meetings of the managerial society one man will frequently say: "I don't know what Mr. Blank wants to do about this problem, but anything he thinks I think different." It is a truly tragic thing that the men who should be the leaders of the great institution that the American theater should be have been incapable of enough business foresight to bind themselves

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firmly together to protect their interests. Always we have been out-generated by the motion picture men, bled white by the ticket speculator and discriminated against by the railroads, the labor unions, and even the newspapers, who are by rights our natural allies and our traditional friends. If the theater is the cultural and the educational force I have always claimed it was, surely it has a right to public loyalty and support and I must always think that, if we have in large part lost that support, it is because the dignity and the importance of the drama has been hidden by the lack of dignity and the lack of importance of many of our leaders.

I thought these things in the time of which I am now writing, 1912-1913, but naturally I had neither the independence of age nor circumstance at that time to dare to fully express myself. Just before the war I had begun to be impatient of the machine-made plays I had been writing for so long and began to listen to my wife's pleadings to cut down the quantity and try to improve the quality of my work. She had been begging me to do this for ten years or more, and

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like other good husbands I rather like to do any little thing my wife asks of me—after she has been asking it for ten years. I really think I wanted to please her, but I also think that I had by this time outgrown the sentimental comedy-drama as once before I had outgrown the cheap melodramas. Naturally enough as soon as I lost my own belief in my form of expression I was no longer successful in it.

Let no man go unchallenged who in your presence talks of purposely “writing down” to an audience, or of “giving them what they want” or any other fish-bait of that description. I am here to tell you that no man ever successfully wrote or produced any play, or any novel below his own mental level at the moment. When I wrote *NELLIE, THE BEAUTIFUL CLOAK MODEL*, I was honestly deeply moved by the lady’s many misfortunes or I couldn’t have put it over, and when I wrote the comedy-dramas that followed it I truly believed in them or no audience in the world would have sat through them. This is always true, I think, of writers or of managers. We are entirely emotional people and our work reflects us. I know of several

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supremely successful producers who made great fortunes selling the piffle they loved and who, as soon as their money brought them contacts that resulted in an increase in their taste and knowledge promptly appointed themselves judges of the drama and even more promptly went broke.

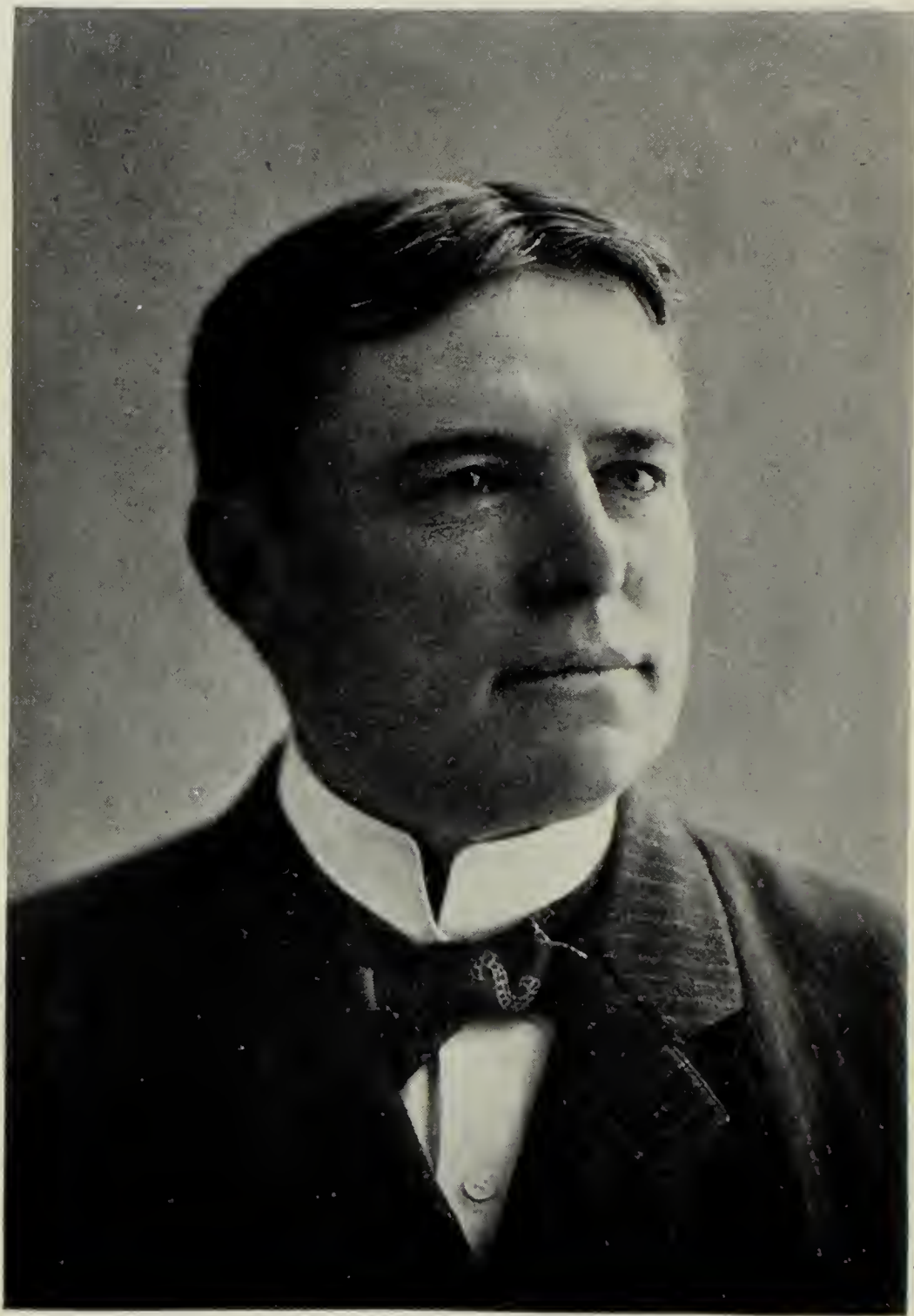
You may well afford to laugh at the faker who boasts of skill great enough to assume a mood and color different from his own. The next time he tells you of how he "wrote down to the boobs" simply tell him he is either a liar or a fool—probably both. For surely, if he is not a liar, he must be the greatest fool on earth to use for a cheap success a genius great enough to have brought him a real one.

If then, about fifteen years ago, I wanted to write a higher form of drama it was for no nobler reason than because I had begun to be bored by the sort of work I was doing and because it bored me it had begun to bore my audiences. Several times in my life I have been driven to an advance of this sort and always because of the fact that I found my old occupation gone. As time goes on, I have come to believe that if I could



Faithfully Yours.
J. J. Jenson

(From the Messmore Kendall Collection)



"I have always admired Augustus Thomas"
(From the Messmore Kendall Collection)

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live two or three hundred years I might develop into quite a playwright. In any case I once more threw my box of tricks away and sat down quietly and tried to study out a new method. In this I was helped by the change that had begun to come over the drama. I was influenced as all our writers were at the time by the Russian and Hungarian dramatists who had discarded the artificial form of the "well-made play" and were writing a new form of photographic realism that tempted us all to follow in their footsteps.

As a result I wrote *THE DETOUR*, which remains in my mind the example of the best work I have done for the theater. Of all my plays the *DETOUR*, *THE GAMBLER OF THE WEST* (one of the old melodramas of the Al Woods days) and *THE NERVOUS WRECK* are my pets. *THE DETOUR* was produced by Lee Shubert at the Astor Theatre in the early fall of 1921 and, although it was never a money-maker, it gave me what I wanted and made my wife very happy. As she had stuck around by this time for some fifteen years waiting for something like this to happen, it was, to say the least, no more than she deserved.

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In the production of *THE DETOUR* I was fortunate enough to be able to secure Augustin Duncan to play the principal part and to stage the play. He more than justified the confidence I had in him. To me Mr. Duncan is a great artist and by far the most sincere example of the man who puts his art above his pocketbook I have ever met. I suppose more rot has been spilled out by men and women who pose as "devoted to their art" than by any other set of posing hypocrites since the world began. We all of us play the tune we know and to rebuke us for that tune is as silly as it is to praise us for it. To use what talents we may have to earn a decent living for ourselves and those dependent upon us is, to a man of any philosophy, a far finer thing than to sit in a Greenwich Village attic and mouth jealous platitudes about the baseness of commercial art.

This statement of my opinion is neither a defense nor an alibi. I myself, as these confessions of mine are describing to you, have always written for the love of the theater rather than from any art impulse and I am the first to admit that my love of

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the theater has always been more compelling than my love of the drama, if you follow me in the distinction.

As a practical man, born of a practical line of hard-headed Yanks, I have studied my own small talents and developed them and tried to make up for a lack of the real fires of genius by an honest admission of that lack and a true enthusiasm for the work that at the moment came nearest to expressing my attitude. The true genius, the true artist, is very rare, but Augustin Duncan is distinctly of that number. He is quite as incapable of doing any work that doesn't seem fine to him as I am of writing anything at all unless I am going to be paid for it, and he is as firm in his refusals as I am. And in my life, during which I have written several million words, I doubt if I have written five thousand without practical reward.

Max Gordon, one of the managers with whom I have been associated, looked at me in troubled amazement one day lately when I had made some mildly humorous comment and said: "That's the first time I ever heard you say anything funny for less than ten

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percent.” Max Gordon, like many others of my acquaintance, assumes this attitude of mine to be founded on a desire for money, but as a matter of fact I care very little about money or the things that money stands for. Any man who can make good can always make money, but the fun is in the making good, in the thrill and the sense of power that comes from activities sanely thought out and successfully accomplished. Under Mr. Duncan’s fine direction *THE DETOUR* was molded into shape and ready for its first performance. Not one word of my original manuscript was changed from the day I wrote it, which fact is most amazingly to his credit rather than to mine. He is so fine a director that he molded his company to my play, rather than my play to his company—the true duty of a director, although few of them have the sense to know it. To the picture director an author’s play is a sort of clover field in which he loves to kick up his heels and romp about at his own sweet will, making any changes at all that his fancy may dictate, most of them being made for the very simple reason that he doesn’t quite grasp the

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meaning of what is on the written page in front of him. Even in the theater there are few managers who realize the value of one man's unbroken line of thought. "Plays are not written, they are re-written" is a motto often repeated to writers and in the old days these wise words were proudly framed and hung over the desk of one of our greatest producers. This musty old truism has been used to slaughter plays during all the years since Dion Boucicault first uttered it, and like most other truisms its principal fault lies in the fact that it isn't true. When I was in Harvard I met Mr. Boucicault in a barroom on Bowdoin Square in Boston and, as I looked at him in awe and homage, I had little thought of ever being bold enough to challenge any of his theories. Dion Boucicault was a great playwright of the eighties, a man of sound knowledge of his craft, but like the best of us there were occasions when he talked nonsense.

Plays are written by their authors. They are good plays or bad plays depending almost wholly upon the degree of talent of the author plus his accident of choice of a subject. This goes for pictures as well as

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for stage plays. The germ of success is put in only by the original author in spite of Mr. Boucicault and the combined opinion of the Managers' Association and the motion picture industry. I am stating here an important fact upon which I have a great deal of special information. I doubt if any man alive has ever been called in as a play doctor more frequently than I, and for the good of my soul I am willing to admit that I have very rarely saved a patient. I have often seen plays helped by careful and skillful revision but I have never once seen a play built into a real success unless the germ of that success was firmly planted by the author in his first manuscript.

Frequently I have seen, so frequently as to have learned to be in dread and horror of the practice, sensitive and beautiful plays and picture stories so coarsened and debased by the rough hands of managers, directors, supervisors and other quacks, that all hope of success has been dosed and purged out of them. I am stoutly of the opinion that if no changes at all in original manuscripts were ever made the percentage of success both in plays and pictures would be

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infinitely higher. This does not in the least mean that I think the author is always right. Of course he isn't. Play writing is the most difficult form of all the forms of literary expression, and no man ever wrote a perfect play. But I think the trained writer knows more about his business than any one else can hope to know, and I think it is as silly for an outsider to meddle with his work as it would be for a kind neighbor to write a few helpful words in the middle of the prescription you have paid a physician to prescribe for your sick child.

Every one in the world is, I suppose, a potential story-teller. I am constantly being asked to read plays written by elevator boys, maid-servants, policemen and taxi drivers, and it is not surprising that when a man finds himself in power over a writer he should at once demand a share of the joy of the creator. But to me play writing is and scenario writing ought to be a definitely understood and carefully studied profession; and the outsider without special knowledge or special talent who undertakes to turn out a masterpiece is in exactly the same position to do good work as the Irish-

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man who had never tried to play the violin but had always thought he could do it.

Even in editorial rooms, where a higher class of intelligence is usually found in authority over the story departments, one notices this instinctive urge to get a finger into the pie and the theater is cursed with it; as the picture business is superlative in all things this very human failing may be found here in its fullest flowering. Just as Tom Sawyer's young friends all wanted a turn at whitewashing the fence so do the picture executives—supervisors, directors, script-girls, cutters, film-editors, messenger boys, stage-hands and scrub-women—all yearn to make just the least little bit of a change in a story to satisfy some instinctive lech to be an author. I have seen so many plays and screen stories ruined by this enforced collaboration that I honestly look upon it as the major evil that threatens a young writer's success.

In the first place it's a silly custom because once the author surrenders the integrity of his story he is helpless to even be a fair judge of the hybrid product that takes its place, and as plays and stories do not succeed

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on account of their structural perfection but by virtue of their spiritual and inspirational qualities, it is obvious that no man without a creative talent has any right to mess about with them.

Duncan knew the folly of all this and his skill and instinct resulted in a fine and sensitive performance.

Again a play of mine was to have its first performance at a holiday matinée and again, as had happened to me during the first matinée of *THROUGH THE BREAKERS*, I was to be given the benefit of an honest lay opinion of my talents. We opened in Asbury Park, New Jersey, famous among people of the theater for drawing the prize boob audiences of America. An audience at any seashore resort is a terrible thing, but in Asbury Park for some reason its reactions are amazing. Good plays die and terrible plays are heralded as great, so that the wise author simply sits in suffering silence with cotton in his ears. Personally as I sat with my wife through this first performance of *THE DETOUR* I had been very happy, so happy in fact that I neglected the cotton, and on my way out of the

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crowded theater I heard the first critical opinion of this, the first attempt on my part to write of life simply and honestly. "Do you know," remarked a very pretty young woman as we passed, "I think I could write a better play than this one myself." In spite, however, of this completely honest expression of opinion THE DETOUR gave me a new standing as a writer of serious plays. Another rusty old saw of the trade is the one about all the great plays resting in closets, trunks and unread in managers' offices, plays so fine that, were they to be produced, a new drama would spring full grown into being. I have been looking for one of those for twenty years, but so far it has escaped me. In all the hundreds of these neglected manuscripts that it has been my sad fate to have read I found just one real play. When I demanded a hearing for it and got one, it turned out to be just fair. There is a real utility about a great play that sooner or later will bring it to the stage; some one will see it and rave about it and it will get its chance. It isn't so difficult to tell a really great play when one reads it, or a really bad play, it's the in-between it is difficult to

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judge, the degree of badness or of value that means failure or success. Careful reading of these supposed masterpieces will usually prove rather a shock. I've read a thousand, and I am not the man I was.

The Great War was over by this time and the changes it had brought about in our moods and our standards was being sharply reflected in the theater. The motion pictures, successful as they had grown to be, had not as yet challenged our right to existence and we had begun to produce something in the nature of an American Drama. Eugene O'Neill had written several fine plays. Arthur Richman's *AMBUSH*, Gilbert Emery's *THE HERO* and my *THE DETOUR* and *ICEBOUND* were at least a step toward a true folk play and the rise of the Theatre Guild and of Arthur Hopkins, who to me has always seemed the great man of the theater in my time, gave fine promise of fine things.

The Great War had disturbed and sobered me. I was about forty-two years old at the time America entered it, fat, near-sighted and cursed with a gouty constitution. Quite obviously I couldn't fight, and

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yet, like all men who stood just across the border line from heroic action, I had my moments of longing and resentment; here was a big thing and I couldn't be part of it. I had been a sort of adventurer all my life and yet when the greatest adventure of all time was going on I must stand on the side lines.

Fate had decided that I was to have no real connection with the war. I was too old, and my two boys were too young. The nearest I came to the feeling of personal participation was when my youngest brother, Colonel, then Major, Robert P. Davis, sailed with his regiment for France. My peace of mind received one slight shock, however, when my oldest son, Donald, then not quite fourteen, slipped away from Yonkers, where we were living at the time, and enlisted in the Navy. Exactly what might have come of that I never will know, for when the young man was marched with a squad of volunteers to the Battery and lined up before the keen eye of an officer, he was rudely yanked out of line and sent home to me with a stern warning which frightened me very much but made no dent at all in the culprit's armor. He felt no re-

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pentance at all but furiously cursed the United States Navy for not knowing a good man when they saw one.

After the war a writer faced a new world. The changes in the form of play writing speak volumes of the change in our mode of thought and our standards. When I had written my first plays in the early nineties, asides were freely spoken. I had frequently written scenes in the old days in which the lovely heroine sat calmly in a chair, violently struggling to pretend not to hear the villain and his fellow conspirators who plotted her undoing in loud voices at a distance of six feet. The soliloquy was also in good usage, that marvelous aid to the clumsy craftsman by which all necessity for a carefully reticent exposition could be laughed aside. I used to start a play, for example, with a lady alone on the stage as the first curtain rose. She would perhaps turn sadly away from the window and looking the audience firmly in its composite eye would exclaim: "Poor John; I wonder if he knows that I have been untrue to him." This naturally saved a lot of time and had a distinct advantage from the

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audience's point of view. They had very little excuse for not knowing what the play was all about.

Deeper, however, than any change in the shifting methods of play writing was the change in the point of view of our audiences. The "Prodigal Son" story, the "Cinderella" story, and the "Magdalen" story seemed to have lost their power; the old one about, "My son shall never marry a daughter of the Hoosis's" no longer bit very deep, and the poor dramatist had to learn all over again.

I can best explain the change that twenty years had brought by telling of an experience I had with a play called *DRIFTWOOD*. I wrote this play in 1905 and read it to a famous star of that time; the lady liked the part and urged her manager to produce the play, but after long reflection he decided against it on the grounds that the heroine of my play had made in her youth what the French writers so politely describe as "a slip," and in his experience it was out of the question that any audience could ever be willing for her, no matter how deep her repentance, to marry a decent man. Twenty years after I dug this old faded

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manuscript out of a trunk and was struck by some scenes of what seemed to me to be of real power and truth, and again I took it to a great woman star, whose verdict was "It didn't seem to her to be about anything worth making such a fuss about." And she was as right in her opinion as the manager of the old days had been in his.

After the production of *THE DETOUR* I attacked my work from a slightly different point of view, and my next job was the very pleasant one of making for my old friend, William A. Brady, the American adaptation of *THE INSECT COMEDY*, which was produced as *THE WORLD WE LIVE IN*. I followed this with *ICEBOUND*, which won for me the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 and caused me to be selected as a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

I had some adventures with *ICEBOUND* before I got it on the stage and got myself into a terrible mess that grew deeper as its success grew more assured. David Belasco had seen *THE DETOUR* and had written me that if I could write another play as good he would gladly produce it at once. I sent him the manuscript of *ICE-*

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BOUND as soon as I completed it, and in a few days had a telegram from him saying that he liked it very much and asked me to see Mr. Roder, his manager, and arrange the details of a contract. The next day I called on Ben Roder, whom I had known for many years, and he offered me a contract containing a clause giving Mr. Belasco the right to produce the play at any time during the next two years. Mr. Belasco was away with David Warfield's production of *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* and Mr. Roder was a bit impatient of my objection to the clause I have mentioned. I have always been in a hurry all my life, and I had caught from Al Woods during my long association with him his ardent desire to see a play on the stage the very moment he falls in love with it. Neither yesterday nor to-morrow ever meant very much to me; to-day has always been the right time to produce any play that I had faith in. This fact is so well known to the men with whom I do business that it is no longer necessary for me to tell them that if they want to do a play of mine at all they must start casting it the very hour after they have first read it. Mr. Roder, however,

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was not quite used to my rather stormy manner, and the result of our talk was an angry outburst on my part.

“Mr. Belasco,” I said, “will give me a contract before noon on Monday for an immediate production or he can’t have the play.” Such language is all out of line in the Belasco office, and Mr. Roder smiled a kindly and tolerant smile as I walked out of his office, merely remarking that he didn’t think I was quite crazy enough to turn down a Belasco production. I have always been a free lance in the theater and perhaps a bit militant in my stand for an author’s rights and his prerogatives, and I made up my mind to go through with my bluff unless Mr. Belasco came to my terms. On Monday I would sell my play to some one else. With this in view I took all four of my remaining manuscripts under my arm, and by noon I had placed three of them with managers of good standing, in each case saying that the play must be purchased by Monday noon or not at all, in each case walking out of the office followed by an exact duplicate of Mr. Roder’s tolerant but unbelieving smile.

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It was noon and I was hungry, so, with my remaining manuscript tucked into my overcoat pocket, I dropped into the grill room of the old Knickerbocker Hotel for lunch. During lunch young Max Gordon, whom I had known since his boyhood, sat down for a moment at my table for a friendly chat. Max Gordon and Al Lewis had been successful vaudeville agents and had recently owned interests in several plays, but as yet had made no productions under their own names. Max was always of an inquiring turn of mind and very little escapes him. One glance at the yellow envelope sticking out of my overcoat pocket was enough.

"How's your new play?" was his first start. His second was to calmly stretch out his hand and take my last manuscript out of my pocket and transfer it to his own. "I'd like to read it," he blandly observed, and in spite of some protest on my part he walked out of the room with it in his pocket. I had already covered the three managers who, aside from Mr. Belasco, had seemed to me to be best fitted to produce this play and I went home. The next day being Satur-

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day, I went up to St. Andrews for my usual week-end game of golf with my golfing partner, Bob Davis, Bob being no blood kin of mine but a very dear friend of many years' standing. Sunday morning the bell of my apartment rang and Mr. Max Gordon walked calmly in and dropped a thousand dollars on my table and blandly announced that "we are going to produce ICEBOUND." Questioned as to the "we" part of it he replied that Sam Harris and Al Lewis had read the play and that Mr. Harris had offered to put it out under his trade mark with Lewis and Gordon as silent but active partners. Sam Harris could then, as he could now, have anything of mine he wanted, so I promptly shook hands and called it a trade.

Then the storm broke. By 'phone, by letter and by telegram every one of the managers whom I had given until Monday noon to buy my play sent messages that they would produce it, and it took me about five years to square myself.

As a matter of fact I have never been able to see the justice in the trade custom of never submitting a play to more than one manager at a time. If I own a house

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and want to sell it, I give that house to more than one agent, and the grocer who displays a particularly fine melon on his stand doesn't consider it the property of the first customer who admires it. Before it's anybody's but his some one must pay good money for it. Experience has taught me that any manager who wants a play never lets an author out of his office until he has signed a contract, and he is crazy if he does. I have been roused from my bed at four o'clock in the morning and forced to promise a play to an excited manager before he allowed me to crawl back under the bedclothes, and any less ardent expression of willingness has grown to be very suspicious in my eyes.

I first learned of the fact that *ICEBOUND* had won the Pulitzer Prize from Al Woods, who called me up and told me the news. He was, I think, as much excited as I, and perhaps he knew better than any one else what a far cry it was from our old Bowery melodramas to the winning of the prize for the best play of 1923. A lot of water had flowed under the mill in those twenty-five years, and to throw so completely



ROBERT H. DAVIS
(Photo by F. X. Cleary)



Owen Davis and his two sons, Donald and Owen, Jr.
(*Photograph by Atlantic Photo Service*)

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aside a hard-won method and adopt another so radically different was a very difficult thing. Since then I have served several times on the committee to award the prize, and I have never voted to give it to a dramatist without recalling my own pleasure in listening to Al Woods' voice over the 'phone when he called up and said: "Listen, sweetheart, who do you think cops the Pulitzer Prize this year?—you'd never guess—neither would I—a guy told me—it's you!"

During the run of *ICEBOUND* Bob Davis ruined a golf game by telling me about a new story he was about to publish. It was, so he told me, written by E. J. Rath, but, as a matter of fact, it had in all probability sprung from his own amazing mind, as have literally hundreds of other stories that have appeared under the names of our most famous writers. Bob has been for many years the dry nurse of American fiction and responsible for the present fame of more successful novelists and short story writers than any one man who has ever lived. This story that he called *The Wreck* bored me very much and quite ruined my game, as Bob usually saves his loudest and most star-

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tling statements until I am at the top of my back swing; so to keep him quiet I told him to shut up and I'd read the fool thing if he would send it to me. When I read the proof sheets, all I could find there was a very amusing character, but urged on by Bob I finally agreed to try my best to make a play out of it. The play was *THE NERVOUS WRECK*, probably one of the most successful farces of the last twenty years.

As soon as I finished this play I took it to Sam Harris, who read it promptly and told me it was terrible. As I fully agreed with him, we decided to have it tried out on the west coast, figuring that the further we got it from the sight of our friends the better. Mr. Harris had at that time some business relations with Thomas Wilks of Los Angeles, and the play was announced for production by him. After the first rehearsal Mr. Wilks' stock company went on strike and refused to play the thing, saying that it was without a doubt the worst play ever written by mortal man. It was only after a battle that they were forced to continue.

Mr. Edward Horton who first played the part has

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since told me that he was never in his life so startled as he was by the screams of laughter that followed his first scene, and he and the leading lady got together after the first performance and hastily learned their lines, a thing that up to that time they had not thought it worth while to do. The farce played in Los Angeles for twelve weeks to enormous business, but Mr. Harris and I were still a bit doubtful and rather reluctantly started to put together a cast for an eastern tryout. We put it on in Atlantic City with Mr. Horton and Miss Frances Howard, now Mrs. Samuel Goldwyn, in the leading parts. After the first performance Mr. Harris confided in me that he had always thought it the worst play he had ever seen and that now he was sure of it. I had very little if any more faith than he had, and we returned to New York together in disgust. But to our amazement the fool thing did a big week's business and we decided to see it once more during the following week in Long Branch. At Long Branch we saw it before a half empty house and decided we would close it up, and that I would work on it at my leisure.

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I re-wrote it completely seven different times, and each time Mr. Harris liked it just a little bit less. It kicked around the office for a year before Al Lewis picked it up in an idle moment and insisted on our once again tempting fate with it.

The third cast we selected for this outcast of ours was headed by Otto Kruger and June Walker. Otto said it was terrible and almost walked out on us, but at last we got it on in Washington, where Mr. Harris said he would come to see it with an unprejudiced eye. This time he only remarked that he'd be damned if he knew why he had ever bothered with the thing, but if it was any fun for me to mess about with such truck he had no objection to my seeing what I could do. Messing about with a farce isn't exactly fun, and I almost killed myself working over it.

During the next week in Baltimore, Mr. Harris wired me that a failure at his New York theater was leaving his house dark, and that he had booked *THE NERVOUS WRECK* to open there the following Monday. By that time I had the play in pretty good shape. Al Lewis, Sam Forrest and I had been at it night and day,

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but I had no last act at all. A farce without a last act is a pretty sad affair, and one night in desperation I remembered a hot comedy scene I had in an unproduced farce called *THE HAUNTED HOUSE*. I promptly pulled the scene bodily out of one play and stuck it into another.

This scene, the examination of some cowboys on a ranch by a young eastern highbrow who used the methods of laboratory psychology, made the play's success, but left me in an awful mess when the time came to produce *THE HAUNTED HOUSE*, which was now without any last act at all. One act, however, has always been a little thing in my life, and I stuck something in the hole left by the missing scene, and with the late Wallace Eddinger in the leading part, *THE HAUNTED HOUSE* did well enough for a season.

CHAPTER VI ✓ HOW TO WRITE THREE HUNDRED PLAYS

I LOVE farce, but of all the forms of dramatic writing it is by all odds the most difficult and demands more hard work and more technical dexterity of the writer than any other.

A good farce, in the first place, must have a plot that could as easily be told as a tragedy, and a character not only essentially true but completely familiar to any audience; and it must have at least three times as much situation in it as any other type of play.

We hear a lot of late of the technique of play writing, and I have grown a bit impatient of some of the dogmatic drivel laid before the eyes of would-be dramatists. In reality the dramatist sails on uncharted seas. There is no master to whose word he can bow, and no oracle to whom he can submit his questions. The only way to write a good play is to make it good.

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If I were asked to put into one sentence the result of my experience as a writer, I should say: "Dream out a story about the sort of persons you know the most about, and tell it as simply as you can."

Of course, rules for play writing don't mean anything, not even that the writer who lays down the rules ever uses them himself. He may be like the cook who prefers to go out to lunch, and yet I have picked up one or two tricks, short cuts, easy ways to do hard things, and I am going to write a few of them down in the faint hope of their being of some slight help to a beginner.

Of course, the usual way to learn to write is by repeated failure, by doing almost everything so badly that the awful consequences are so deeply burned into one's memory that each disaster has resulted in being so terrified of one particular blunder that it can never be repeated.

Technique is, as I understand it, simply a facing of certain facts, a realization of some mistakes, a summing up of some experiences of one's self or of others, into an expressed formula. I think I believe in that.

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It is a good thing to know thoroughly all the rules of play writing (only there really aren't any). These rules, the result of one's own experience or the theories of others should be carefully learned, and then twice as carefully forgotten. Conscious technique in any art is very painful. The sculptor knows that under his clay are the trusses to hold up his figure, but he doesn't let them show. It might be well to note, however, that if he forgot to put them in, his beautiful figure would be a shapeless mass on the floor.

Of course, the man who knows the most about play writing doesn't write the best plays, but quite as surely knowing a little about his trade isn't going to hurt him. I quarrel sometimes with my friend, M. L. Mal-evinsky, over the real value of this special knowledge. To me play writing is almost entirely an emotional thing, and in the foreword I wrote for his quite remarkable book on *THE TECHNIQUE OF THE DRAMA* I tried to express my feeling of the limitations of technical knowledge by writing: "It is probable that the hedge sparrow has quite as much technique as the meadow lark, but only the song bird can sing."

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If you care to read the few observations I am about to write down, read them with the thought that they aren't meant to be too slavishly followed; they are not words of wisdom at all, they are simply scars from the battlefield, and they are only meant as a sort of protective mechanism to save your fingers from being burned as deeply as my own have been.

1. Don't write at all until you have something you are sure is worth writing about.

2. Don't make notes. Anything one may possibly forget isn't worth remembering.

3. After your story has shaped itself in your mind, tell it to yourself over and over and over again—then try it on some one else. Wives are good; they have to stand for it. Let the first thing you put down on paper be an outline narrative of your play, written in two hundred words. If your story won't go into two hundred words, throw it away. The next step is to write several more outlines, at first in narrative form. Later put in a little dialogue, not probably to be used

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in your final copy, but to give you a growing acquaintance with your characters.

4. Modern plays are about how characters react to situations, not about situations in themselves.

5. Be absolutely sure of your last scene before you write a word of your first act. Paul Potter, a master of the form of play writing, was the first to tell me that the French dramatists always wrote their last act first. I have never quite done that, but I do try to know exactly what I am going to do with my characters at the end of the play before I start out. One of the oldest mechanical rules of play writing is, Act 1 plus Act 2 equal Act 3. I have altered that a little in my own work, and I think I could express it as: the characters of Act 1 multiplied by the emotions of Act 2 equal Act 3. A play really is a character driven by an emotion along a definite line to a definite end. Mr. Malevinsky states somewhat the same thing. I fully agree with him that every play expresses a definite emotion, but I do not think the author is or should be conscious of the fact. In the end any carefully written play results in a story line marked out by one

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character, driven by one dominant emotion to the definite climax of that emotion—success, failure, love, death, whatever it may be. But if one wants a successful play, it must have an ending absolutely made imperative by what has happened in the first part of your story, plus what has happened in the second part. If two-thirds of the way through you have a possible choice as to the outcome, you will have a failure every time. Authors write first acts and second acts, but the audience writes all good last acts. A modern audience cares very little whether your play ends happily or not, but they insist upon its ending along the line you yourself have started it on, and audiences know a lot more about play writing than any dramatist ever knew.

6. Don't try to tell of the sort of life you don't know anything about. If you know the little girl next door, tell a story about her—forget the King of France.

7. If, after you have written a speech, and read it over and find it sounds very beautiful to you, cross it out; beauty in the modern play is in the thought, not in the words. This is a tough lesson for us old-timers

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to learn, and to this day the last thing I do before I send my manuscript on its first journey is to comb it over for stray "effective speeches" or bits of bombast, once my specialty and now my bitterest enemy.

8. Don't give a thought as to how big or how little your cast is, or how much or how little your production is going to cost. If it's a good play it can't cost too much, and if it's a bad one it can't help it.

9. Get yourself in the habit of reading over all you have written previously before you start each day's work, and as the manuscript grows force yourself to be more and more critical of what you have done. A play should consist of at least a hundred thousand words, twenty thousand on paper and eighty thousand in the waste basket.

10. Don't worry about how long it is going to take you to finish your task; it doesn't matter. Some days you won't be able to write at all, and other days you can't stop writing. I have written through hundreds of lunch and dinner hours and thousands of business and social appointments. Don't let any one bother

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you when you are writing or anything. If the 'phone rings, don't answer it, and if your wife rebels, divorce her. Nothing and nobody is important when the thoughts are boiling. Nobody expects a dramatist to be a respectable member of society, and any crime is justified. If you find yourself bored at your desk go and play golf, play anything, but stop writing. If you find yourself in your stride keep at it. I wrote one entire act of *THE DETOUR* without getting up from my chair, sixty-five hundred words in longhand in eight hours. Teach yourself this trick of crawling into your shell like a mud turtle and letting the world roll by.

I have developed a habit of concentration until it is an almost idiotic habit. When I have a play in my head neither time nor space exist for me. I am forced to keep a car and a man to drive it because I have so trained my mind to focusing that the moment I sat back in a seat on the subway it was a foregone conclusion that I would be put off the train at Van Cortland Park when I lived on East 63rd Street. For a time I tried driving a car myself, but no sooner did I find

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myself on a straight road than my mind clicked back on its job of play making until I drove into a ditch or ran through a traffic light. At length I was persuaded to give up driving, not entirely out of respect for the law, but because the roars of outraged traffic cops disturbed my train of thought.

Some years ago my wife was taken to the hospital for a critical operation and I spent the most horrible day of my life awaiting a verdict that meant life or death. At length I was allowed to see her for five minutes and told to go home and not to return until late the following day. Absolutely broken by what I had been through I returned to our empty rooms; it was ten o'clock at night; sleep was out of the question. I sat at my desk making marks on a pad of paper. Suddenly I was struck by, of all things, an idea for a farce, and I started to write. Sometime later I had a feeling of fatigue, and I sadly said to myself: "I'm getting old. I'm not the man I was." Then I noticed that, although my lights were burning, it was broad daylight outside. I looked at my watch and discovered that it was two o'clock. I had

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been writing for sixteen hours. When Mrs. Davis came back from the hospital two weeks later I had written, sold, cast and started rehearsals of *EASY COME, EASY GO*, and she was rather curious as to where this stranger had come from.

I wrote a melodrama called *HER MARRIAGE VOW* in three days, many years ago, and it played three years. On the other hand, I worked eleven months on *THE NERVOUS WRECK*. Time doesn't mean a thing. Any good newspaper man will tell you that if he couldn't turn out three thousand words of copy a day he couldn't hold his job. A play is seldom more than twenty-one thousand words, seven days' work if you want it to be, seven years' work if it happens to come that way.

As a matter of fact, I figure that it takes me one hundred hours to write a play, which, of course, can be one hour a day for one hundred days, or ten hours a day for ten days; but please note that my trick is never to start writing until I have solved every problem, drawn every character and completely laid out my story line. The trick of carrying all this in your

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mind with absolutely no notes to fall back upon is rather a difficult one to master, but it is, I am sure, of great value. What really happens is that in the course of the weeks you go about with this junk shifting about in your head, the sub-conscious part of your mind does most of your work for you, and when you start to write it out you will be amazed to read what your own hand has written.

When I am writing, I make it a rule to go over my story fully in my mind just before I go to sleep and to start writing the next morning before I have read my mail or even the morning papers. Very often points are clear to me that were clouded the night before, and I find that the part of my mind that remained active while I slept has been helping me to pay the rent.

There is a great difference between inspiration and imagination, and although I believe in inspired writing—that is, I believe that some men and women upon some fortunate occasion write from an emotional prompting deeper and finer than their conscious mind could inspire—I do not confuse the mental pictures

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of an imaginative mind with so exalted a word. There are and always have been two sorts of writers, the writer who tells what he sees, or has read or thought or been told, and the writer whose mind is a sort of old-fashioned kaleidoscope that forms little mental pictures quite without conscious effort. In other words, one writer uses trained observation, and the other has the gift of spontaneous creation. I have on several occasions seen the story line of an entire play laid out before me in one flash at a time when I, to the best of my knowledge, was not thinking of any such thing at all. I can, on a bet, at any time close my eyes and shake my head and look up and tell a story that, so far as I can discover, I have never for a moment thought of before.

As a matter of fact, this very unusual development of the power of sub-conscious creation is a terrible nuisance to me, as my mind races along so easily down any path that I am dragged along after it without stopping long enough to make sure that this path is the one that taste and prudence dictate. I often envy the writer who is forced to stop and build his plot

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brick by brick, but so far as I know I never work out a story at all. The story comes to me as Topsy came to an unappreciative world "born growed." If a story of mine is challenged by a manager in whom I have confidence it is no trouble at all for me to say, "Well then, suppose it went like this," and rattle off a completely different fiction. I have never been able to harness this trick of mine, and often when I have made up a story in a flash and sold it to some friendly manager I have gone home and started to write it to discover that it insists upon coming out entirely different, and that the manager who loved the first one has to recall to me the details of the plot I have quite forgotten.

Once about ten years ago I read a play that never existed at all to a famous manager. I had promised him a play, and when the time came to deliver it I hadn't had a moment to think of it, so I took with me to his office an old typed manuscript and gravely read it to him in the rough, a play that I made up as I went along. The manager liked the play very much, but when I handed it in a few weeks later he said

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he had never in his life seen so many changes made, and that he vastly preferred the first draft.

11. Keep in mind that no part of a play, and this is especially true of farce, is effective when it is not convincing. The more belief you create in your characters and situations, the greater your success. Truth in play writing is quite as valuable as it is in life, but, just as in life, there is a limit to the extent to which simple truth telling may safely be indulged in. When Hamlet told the players to "hold the mirror up to nature" he was quite aware that when they looked in that mirror they would see a reflection, not nature itself. In the arts, truth is art, but it isn't always true. We value a play either because (1) of its truth, (2) of its wide departure from the truth, or (3) because of a romantic desire excited in us that these related incidents should be true.

We, the audience, must follow each step of a play with full belief in that step, but where the dramatist's skill comes in is in being able to make of himself such a glamorous and subtle liar that what he feels to be true becomes the truth. It is the same with any of



DONALD DAVIS
Playwright
(Photograph by White Studio)

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“plovers’ eggs,” but up to now I’ve never eaten any. I think I know personally all of the dramatists of America and many of the best of England. I am sure that there are more able and talented men and women writing for the stage to-day than ever before, but Eugene O’Neill is the only one I know with what I would admit to be genius. I don’t always like Mr. O’Neill’s plays and I never like all of any of them, but there is always something under them that the rest of us don’t get. To me he is a mile above the rest of us.

Sidney Howard, Max Anderson and, in melodrama, Bayard Veiller know their business better than he does, but O’Neill’s plays come from deeper down, not deeper in his brain as some people think, but from the depths of the particularly sensitive heart of a particularly sensitive man. So, leaving genius aside, I think courage the quality most valuable to the man or woman who expects to win a place in the very odd world of the theater where there are no standards at all, either mental, moral or ethical, and where the author must of necessity stand alone against groups

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with different and antagonistic interests. From the moment an author signs a contract for the production of a play until that play has lived its life on the stage, gone through its course of stock company and foreign productions and been sold "down the river" and turned into a moving picture, every single hand that comes in contact with that play is the hand of a potential enemy. The manager and his staff, the actors in a group, the scenic artists and the technical departments all have the power and as a rule they desire to put in a little something by way of change, something usually that will be to their advantage and destructive to the best quality of the work.

This of course means fight. An author surely might as well fight and be licked as to be licked without fighting, and the method adopted by the experienced street fighter of getting in the first punch is most earnestly recommended. There is to all these groups but one real hope in any play—the hope that the author wrote something; if he did, they all, manager, actor, etc., have a chance for success; if he didn't they haven't. Authors of plays, like dentists, are never

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popular; nobody really likes to have them around.

Writers are so different in their method that I hesitate to advise a course that has been very useful to me, that is to vary the form of writing often enough to escape the boredom that follows walking over the same path too frequently. I like to follow a heavy drama with a farce, and a light comedy with a melodrama. Of course, one man usually writes one form of play better than he does another; yet even in an age of specialists, the good marksman should learn to handle all the tools of his trade, and no man can write deep drama without a sense of comedy, and most assuredly can't write farce without a definite note of tragedy.

I have always had a lot of fun writing mystery plays, although a well-built mystery drama represents a staggering amount of hard work. The formula is a very exact and very exacting one, and in addition to its mechanical difficulties the author must not only create an interest in who committed the crime, but, if he hopes for success, he must make them fear that some one character dear to them is guilty. In other words,

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the mystery play in which one hasn't gone deep enough into the emotions to make the audience care who committed the murder is never successful, no matter how mysterious it may be.

Emile Gaboriau was the master of this form of writing, and to this day we all more or less faithfully follow his model, although his complicated plot structure requires more skill and patience than most modern authors are able to supply. Poe borrowed the formula, as he quite frankly admitted, and from him it descended to Anna Catherine Green, whose *LEAVENWORTH CASE* and *HAND AND RING* are fine examples of this form of writing. Jumping again across the Atlantic, we see in the Sherlock Holmes character, and in Watson's shrewd "feeding" of that character strong traces of the Gaboriau style. After these came the deluge: Bayard Veiller, with his almost perfect *THE 13TH CHAIR*, several of my own and many others leading up to the endless stream of mysterious murders, strange disappearances, midnight crimes, haunted houses, etc., etc., etc.

I know hundreds of men who read one at one sit-

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ting, but I defy any man to write one in less than one hundred hours of solid work. When I tackle a job of this sort, my study looks like an architect's work room, charts everywhere, on the wall and tables and even on the floor. I make a chart for each character, showing exactly where he is, what he says and what he is thinking of each moment of the play. In this sort of trick writing, every word one says is extremely likely to be used against him. Next to rough farce, the writing of a play of this sort calls for more technical skill and inventive power than any other form of play making.

The only thing I can add to these scattered notes about play writing is that no one should allow a failure to beat him. There isn't anything at all remarkable about having written a bad play; it's been done before and it's going to be done again. It's writing a good play that is unusual as the man who bit the dog; he's the fellow worth talking about. No matter how much you may be scorned and derided for having written what you wrote, no matter how sure you may be that you never again will dare to look anybody in the face

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—for a dramatist's failure in the theater, for some reason that escapes me, seems to carry with it a moral disgrace and a social ostracism—in spite of this you will get another chance when you get another play. I have always demanded that each new play of mine should be judged exactly as though I had never written one before, and, as I said earlier in this article, the critic must tell the truth; he may not want to, but if you really have done a good job he can't help himself. Critics, like dramatists, are emotional idiots.

Although I remain firmly of the opinion that the talent of the dramatist, like the talent of the great singer, actor, painter and musician, is a thing born in them and not to be acquired by any other than the chosen few, I know that love and appreciation of the theater may be taught and hidden talents discovered and developed. When in my college days I was running one hundred yards in ten and one-fifth seconds I often thought that, in spite of the fact that few men alive at that time had me beaten that time, there were probably plenty of young fellows in the country towns who could have been trained to beat it. Every boy

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in the world doesn't try to run a hundred yards, and of course many a doctor and lawyer and business man has been born with the gift of poetry, music, painting and drama and has neglected those talents or even been quite unconscious of them. These new classes of Dramatic Arts in the schools and universities will catch any submerged talent and bring it to the light and beside this they will make cultured audiences, and in the end good audiences will make good plays.

Our present bewilderment in the theater as to what the public wants would soon vanish if we had a public who themselves knew what they wanted and when the day comes when we have a large audience ready to express the growing demand for mature and adult drama even we laggards of the theater will hasten to furnish it—we are all of us hungry for success even to the extreme of being willing to do good work for it.

In November of last year a group of Harvard undergraduates, accompanied by Professor Parker of the Harvard English Department, called on me, and at the same time on Winthrop Ames and Lee Simonson and asked us to help them form a school of the drama

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in Cambridge. The Harvard faculty seemed unwilling to provide the desired instruction in the arts of the theater and since Professor Baker's withdrawal there had been no Dramatic Department. Mr. Ames, Mr. Simonson and I called a meeting of Harvard graduates at the Harvard Club and asked these boys to meet us there and tell us their troubles and their desires. As a result of that meeting the Cambridge School of the Drama was organized with a board of governors whose names read like an all-star cast. At this school students of Harvard and Radcliffe and a limited number of outsiders may now take courses in dramatic technique and the arts of the theater.

The faculty of the school is composed of Albert R. Lovejoy, Walter Prichard Eaton and H. W. L. Dana. The visiting lecturers and board of governors, each of whom is to lecture once each term and meet the students for informal talks, are:

Lecturers on play production—Winthrop Ames, Vinton Freedley, Kenneth Macgowan, Gilbert Seldes, Maurice Wertheim.

Lecturers on drama and criticism—Heywood

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Broun, J. Brooks Atkinson, J. W. D. Seymour, H. K. Motherwell, John T. Williams, Isaac Goldberg, Professor C. T. Copeland, Norman Hapgood, Prof. J. Tucker Murray, Owen Wister, Robert Littell, H. T. Parker.

Lecturers on stage lighting, scene designing, etc.—Lee Simonson, Robert Edmond Jones.

Lecturers on play construction—Eugene O'Neill, Sidney Howard, David Carb, Philip Barry, Edward Sheldon, Percy Mackaye, Robert Sherwood, S. N. Behrman, Owen Davis.

Lecturers on the art of acting, etc.—John Mason Brown, Walter Hampden, Elliot Cabot, Robert Middlemass, Osgood Perkins.

There is a list for you! All Harvard men and all men who have done real work. I can remember when I was one of three Harvard men in the game. Now we are getting our new blood from all the great universities. Walter Eaton told us at one of our meetings that he had listed over five hundred universities and high schools in the country that were giving special courses in the Arts of the theater! Does that look

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like a dying institution? Five hundred schools turning out each year a flock of boys and girls who, if they have learned nothing else, have learned to love the theater.

To me that doesn't spell the end of the theater, it means the beginning, and I am eager to try to teach our own little group all I can before they get started on their own and get so far ahead of me that I shall have to turn about and study their methods.

This school, with its staff of real workers, seems to me to be about the most practical place of instruction established since the day when the boy in NICHOLAS NICKLEBY was told to spell w-i-n-d-e-r, and then go and wash it. I know what meeting and talking to such a list of men would have meant to me thirty-five years ago. Among the warm spots in my memory are meetings I had years ago with Dion Boucicault, A. M. Palmer, Daly and Percy Mackaye's famous father, and these men weren't trying to teach me anything, they were trying to get rid of me as quickly as they could.

CHAPTER VII / THE DRAMATIST'S PROFESSION

As time went on I found myself fully versed in all of the troubles that beset a dramatist and armed against all of them but one. I had learned a good substitute for patiently waiting for a production by turning out so many plays that one of them was always on the fire. I had learned, in a measure, to comfort myself for the present failure with the thought of a coming success, but no philosophy of mine has ever taught me what could possibly be done with a dramatist on the opening night of one of his plays. I have, I think, tried everything, and all that I can be sure of is that the last way of passing that dreadful ordeal was very much the worst way I had ever experimented with.

Twenty years ago it was the custom to drag a terrified author before the curtain at the end of the per-

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formance and entice him into telling the audience how glad he was that they liked his play, and how grateful he was to the manager, the director, the actors, stage hands, ushers and stage-door-keeper. This gracious speech being received with some applause, the poor author went home thrilled by this assurance of overwhelming success, and woke up the next morning to read that his play was probably the worst catastrophe of a direful season. This custom of writers being part of the first night show has gone out—not, I think, that the authors wouldn't still be willing to oblige, but because the managers learned that most of the shows were bad enough without any added attraction.

Some of our more dignified authors a generation ago used to sit in the stage box in full view of the audience, but they grew strong men in those days, and I doubt if there is a playwright alive bold enough to follow their example. I have tried sitting in the gallery, staying at home, standing at the back of the theater after the house lights were lowered, hanging around the stage alley, going to a picture show, drinking too many cocktails, and walking around Central

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Park, but so far I haven't found a way that wasn't awful. This night is the climax of six weeks of hard work, to say nothing of all the effort put into the writing of the play; it means a fortune or nothing, fame or something that is almost disgrace, and the poor wretch can do nothing. A forgetful actor, a careless stage hand, or the blowing of an electric fuse can and has spoiled many a good play, and all that he can do is suffer.

There is no second chance for a play; if its first night in New York is a failure it is dead forever. Luckily the first night audience, supposed to be so hard boiled and over critical, is the easiest audience in the world to sweep off its feet and the most generous in their real joy in the discovery of a good play. Tough they are at first, but the moment they get a feeling that something worth while is happening they go along with you with a whoop. I have fallen down plenty of times, but the kick that has come to me when I have put one over is worth a lot. Any way I figure it I am ahead of the game.

This first night audience is a very powerful factor

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in deciding the fate of a play, and the "thumbs down" of the old Romans was no more final than the harsh laugh that follows some shabby bit of sentimentality or some bit of hooey philosophy. Many authors and managers of late are trying to fill their houses on a first night with a more friendly crowd, thinking, like the well-known ostrich, that they are putting something over, but they forget that mass psychology is a very curious thing, and that if a man puts his doting mother out in front on a first night he is very likely to hear her voice leading the first cry of "Off with his head."

The whole subject of dramatic criticism, either from a first night audience or from professional dramatic critics, is a very simple one, but for some reason it is very little understood. As a matter of fact neither this audience nor the critics' notices of the following day have anything at all to do with the real success or failure of a play. In the morning you open your paper and on the dramatic page you read that your favorite critic saw a play the night before and made the remarkable discovery that it was worth seeing—

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so did a thousand others at the same time—the fact being simply that it was a good play. The critics' praise did no more toward making it good than did the favorable response of the audience.

Of course many plays are in the balance; some persons like them and some don't; but there is little doubt in the minds of trained observers about the really fine plays, and even less about the really bad ones. A play comes to life for the first time when it is played before a wise audience, and their verdict is as a rule both just and final. A good play can take care of itself, and any fool knows a really bad one—when he sees it. Any of us, when we go out and buy a dozen eggs, is likely enough to get a bad one, but we are quick enough to gag over it when we try to eat it. The critic is simply a man who knows a little more, and usually cares a little more, about the theater than the ordinary man of cultivated taste, and he has been trained in a proper manner of expressing himself.

What he tells his readers about a new play is first the truth. This in effect you or I could do as well as he does: it was a good play. The modern critic,

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however, goes beyond that in his influence upon the theater by insisting upon an increasingly higher standard both in writing and in acting, and by pointing out the virtues or the defects in the performance, instructing his public in what may fairly be expected of the modern drama. Naturally there are bad critics, just as there are bad writers and bad actors, and the bad ones do harm, just as the bad actors and bad writers do.

The first night audience in itself, although still picturesque, has changed greatly in the last few years. Twenty years ago opening nights of any importance at all were naturally far fewer in number than they are to-day, and an opening at Daly's, Palmer's, the Lyceum and later at the Empire, drew a brilliant audience made up of the real lovers of the theater and the cream of the "four hundred" that then represented New York society. To be on the first night list in those days meant something. The first night audience of to-day is very different. First nights now are rarely social affairs, and the audience is very much more of the profession, actors, managers, critics, writ-

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ers and all the moving picture crowd. These, together with the dressmakers and play agents and scouts from the various studios on the lookout for screen material, make up a colorful gathering and they know a lot about theatrical values even if they lack a little of the distinction of the old first night crowd.

During the years I have been going to the theater I have seen some thrilling first nights, but I have never really been one of the regulars, as nowadays if one were to try to be present every time a new play opened there would be very little time for anything else. I recall distinctly some of the great nights when I have been present, such as the first performance of *THE FORTUNE HUNTER*, *ON TRIAL*, *RAIN*, *WHAT PRICE GLORY*, *BROADWAY*, *BURLESQUE*, *COQUETTE* and many more where a wave of enthusiastic cheering swept the play into instantaneous success. We of the theater, I think, when we watch these first nights with an anxious eye, are apt to forget that the reason a play goes over with a bang is because it is a good play, or a novel play, or the sort of play that at that moment is the play the public wants and the play makes the first night en-

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thusiasm. The first night enthusiasm doesn't make the play.

My years of almost frantic application to my work had by now resulted in a fixed habit and I found myself pounding along at top speed long after the necessity for such effort had disappeared. It is the literal truth to say that for more than thirty years there has been no time in which I have not had a play in some stage of its progress on my desk and in response to long training, my mind continually drops automatically into retrospective revery entirely without conscious direction on my part.

I was not satisfied with the work I was turning out and decided to make an effort to take life more easily than had been my habit. I remember getting quite a thrill out of this evidence of my sanity and prudence. I had not fully realized how fixed the habits of a lifetime may become and soon discovered how impossible it was for me to hope to reform.

Before I admitted defeat, however, I made really quite an honest effort and forced myself to take part in several of the semi-social and semi-political activities

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of the theater. I had always refused any demands upon my time not connected either with my own work or with the affairs of the Dramatists' Guild or the Authors' League, but I now turned deliberately to these rather remote outlets for my energy. For the first time in my life I tried to make myself believe that it is as important to talk about work as it is to do the work itself, an error of judgment on my part from which my sense of humor rescued me before I had gone very far.

The most interesting of these activities was the attempt to establish a National Theatre as it was called, and although the plan failed, I have always thought the failure was unnecessary. The committee to organize this National Theatre was selected from the best men of the theater, the fine arts departments of the leading eastern universities and the leading social and financial groups of New York. We were to produce one play a year with special attention to manners and diction and show this play at moderate prices in all of the larger cities of the country.

At the first meeting at the Astor Hotel, Augustus

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Thomas was selected as chairman and from the start most of the active work fell upon his broad shoulders. Augustus Thomas is by far the best presiding officer I have ever known, and for years it has been my fate to be obliged to follow him as chairman, president or mouthpiece of countless societies and committees; but on this occasion I was content to remain in the background. I seem to be of use only when there is a very practical issue, and the National Theatre was a rather altruistic, rather visionary scheme that seemed to me to be a little out of my range. To me the thing that helps the theater most is a good show, no matter who writes it or who produces it or where it comes from; and to me a well-written, well-played play, produced by the commercial theater, is far more stimulating than an equally fine performance inspired by some art group. I have always admired Augustus Thomas; when I first came to New York in the early nineties he was the outstanding dramatist, and in fact as a writer of the better type of melodrama no man of my time has equaled him. Aside from his ability as a writer, he is a man of real eloquence and of commanding pres-

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ence, and his control of any meeting over which he presides always makes me blush at the thought of my own abrupt and rather arbitrary methods.

Upon this occasion, in spite of the great names on the committee, Mr. Thomas was given full charge, and it was decided that the first play to be produced by the National Theatre should be *AS YOU LIKE IT*, a decision I heard announced with dire misgivings as I have always thought it a particularly dull and silly play. I was naturally afraid, however, to announce any such radical views in that exalted company. A cast was engaged and the production opened in due time before a brilliant audience in Washington.

It is an unfortunate fact that even the plays of Shakespeare that have retained their vitality can only be efficiently done by players who have been trained to play them, and in this particular case the performance was not anything to rave over. In fact the curtain fell on the first performance with that dull thud that always announces failure, and the audience was cold and unresponsive.

Mrs. Thomas, who had been with her husband

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through many of his own first nights, and who had been trained, as all wives of playwrights are, to give help and comfort to the stricken, hurried backstage as the curtain fell and found her husband sitting sadly amidst the scenery of Shakespeare's famous masterpiece with his head bowed and a look of deep dejection on his face. Her maternal instinct fully aroused by her man's agony, she stepped tenderly to his side and putting her arm gently over his shoulder she murmured bravely: "Never mind, Gus, thank God you didn't write it."

There was no reason that I could see why the first attempt of the National Theatre should have ended its existence, but the fact remains that from that day to this I have heard no more about it and I turned back to my own work with some feeling of thankfulness. After all, if a man must be mixed up in a failure, why shouldn't he have the fun of being responsible for all of it? and, since a man with a mind trained to full activity must focus his thoughts on something, isn't it better after all that the something should be the activity he knows the most about?

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I don't in the least know how long a writer is supposed to last. It may well be that my thirty odd years have been the greater part of my share although I am sure I should enjoy making it an even hundred, but I do know that to keep up with the parade to-day a writing man must keep his eyes wide open and his fingers on the pulse of the public. This is many times more true to-day than it was in the years before the war, but even then the critical sense of the public was growing rapidly.

In the old days a playwright's plots and characters were accepted about as automatically as the church creeds of the time were accepted, and for about the same reason; the habit of the average citizen of thinking things out for himself had not yet grown to its present stimulating proportion. If both the church and the stage of to-day are placed in a position where they must fight for their life, surely nothing that is fine in either of them is in danger. With the bunk gone the truth will be twice as powerful.

It has always seemed to me to have been Ibsen who sounded the first note of modern characterization in

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the drama. Good dramatists have always drawn good characters, but the accent upon the character and the character's propelling force upon the narrative was quite different. Hamlet, Macbeth, Juliet, Portia, Rip, Caleb Plummer, Duston Kirk and hundreds of others were finely drawn characters, but Ibsen's Nora not only lived and moved but she moved the play with her and her emotional progress marked the progress of the drama.

After the production of *THE NERVOUS WRECK* I tried very hard to write the play I earnestly wanted to write, but I couldn't get it. *THE DETOUR* and *ICE-BOUND* were true plays from my point of view, honest attempts to do the best work I knew how to do. But I had a feeling that the American drama should express a more optimistic note, that it was, or ought to be, possible to write of life as truly as plays of that class were trying to write about it, and yet express the fundamental difference between our lives and the lives of the people of Middle Europe, whose dramatists had given birth to the new school of naturalistic play writing.

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I know, as a sane man of middle age, that the lives around me are not always dull, drab, base or unhappy. I was acquainted with a mother, she was in fact a member of my own household, who had given up a career for her children and who was neither heart-broken nor neurotic; her children weren't idiots, ungrateful brats or headed either for the gallows or an early grave. I had seen her make sacrifices for them that were well made and well worth the making. On the whole in this world I have seen men and women reap what they have sown, and I have looked closely at life with a trained eye for a great many years and found it good.

I wanted to say something like this in a natural, true and unsentimental way and I couldn't do it. I don't in the least know why it can't be done, but so far it hasn't been. I don't propose to take all the blame for this. I'll admit that NELLIE, THE BEAUTIFUL CLOAK MODEL said that virtue always won out in the end, but before Nellie's time that statement had been made in platitude.

It may be that the sugar-coated play has killed the

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possibility of optimistic play writing, but I didn't want to write about life's being worth living just to trick a happy ending. I simply wanted to say that life was worth living because that is the way I have found it. I have lived fifty-six years very happily. I have been fortunate in having the sort of wife and the sort of children that have added very greatly to that happiness. I love my work and as a result I have never had any trouble in making all the money necessary for comfort and decency. I am strong and well and those I love are well—why should I write of a sorrowful world? Yet for some reason every time I tried to write a true play the note of futility crept into it.

I floundered about for the next year or two, turning out a few plays, most of which I would have described in the far-off days when I had worked for the Kentucky Coal Company as "run of the mine." *LAZYBONES* had some good points. *THE DONOVAN AFFAIR* made money, but always I was trying for that real play that wouldn't come.

The best work I did at this time was a dramatization of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *THE GREAT GATSBY*.

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The character of Gatsby made a strong appeal to me, and here was another chance to do a play with Mr. Brady, who seemed anxious for me to come in with him once more. The play was really good, and moderately successful, but here was another time when the truth was bitter and cruel and hard for the public to take.

Naturally I knew perfectly well when I read this novel that Mr. Fitzgerald's ending absolutely killed any hope of real success, but I have my own theories about dramatizing a novel, and one of them is that the dramatist is in honor bound not to cheapen or coarsen the original author's story. Gatsby was a great lover; for the sake of the girl he loved he raised himself from nothing to wealth and power. To do this he became a thief. She was unworthy of so great a love and he died by one of those absurd ironic chances that saved him from ever knowing her complete unworthiness. Mr. Fitzgerald knew that for Gatsby death was a merciful friend, and I felt that I had no right to manufacture a conclusion that would satisfy a sentimental audience.

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As a matter of fact, I do not enjoy working on another writer's story, but when I make up my mind to do it I deliberately put myself into that writer's place and absorb his mind and style so that I write, as far as I am able, as he would write rather than as I would write a scene myself. In the case of F. Scott Fitzgerald that was difficult, not only because I had never seen him, but because he was so much younger than I that his whole mode of thought and all his reactions to life were absurdly different from my own. But a faithful dramatist of an author's work should, I think, assume that author's personality and should force himself into the completely receptive attitude of the believer who, with his fingers on a ouija board, lets the pencil go where the spirits direct. The result of this collaboration was a good play, but not a real success. I have always known that, if I had cared to do it, I could have made from this material a great box office hit, but as I have said before, I think that when one takes another writer's work, there is an implied obligation not to alter the mood of it.

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This feeling is the reason, I think, why I have never cared to work on a play with another author, and why I object so strongly to the "story conference" and the group writing of Hollywood. To me a play is so essentially a mood and it is so impossible for two human beings to enter into the same exact mood that all such collaboration is started under a very real handicap. I can understand being in full agreement with another writer upon details of plot and even upon shades of character but the mood that would compel certain reactions from the characters, that must of necessity propel them along the narrative line in a certain way, could not dominate two writers at the same moment.

I have had little experience in collaboration but in the writing of screen stories I do know that no matter how many writers are working on the same job, only one of them is really doing anything, and, as there is no established technical form to screen story writing, all that happens at one of these famous story conferences is that the man with the most authority writes the story and the others sit around and talk

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about whatever subject, if any, interests them at the moment. I can see how two dramatists might work together to advantage if one were a highly imaginative writer and the other an expert in form and construction, one to dream out the play and the other to build it. In fact I know of several cases where this method has been highly successful but to me all the joy of creating would be gone if I was forced to share it. Good or bad, I want my play to be mine, and the thrill that has come to me on the few occasions when I have been able to look at a play and say: "It is good, and I did it," has been a rich return for all the hard work I have ever done.

At about this time Mr. Winthrop Ames, as Chairman of a Committee of the Theatrical Managers, offered me the position of political head of their association, the same sort of job as Judge Landis holds in baseball or Will Hays in the motion picture field. I had a feeling that my wide experience in all the branches of the theater gave me some of the qualifications necessary for this work, and for some time I seriously considered it. The actors, through Mr.

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Frank Gilmour, and the Authors' League expressed a desire that I should try my luck, but in the end I refused. Mr. Ames promised me full authority, but I could see no way by which this authority could be enforced. I know the managers very well, thank you, and any time I ride hard on those birds I want a big club and the only gun in the outfit. Also I had a strong feeling that the time hadn't quite come. A little later some better man will take that job and save the day.

In spite of my knowing that I was not doing all I ought to do as a playwright, these were happy and prosperous years. I was very active in the politics of the theater and very happy at home. My boys were growing up. Donald was at Pomfret and Owen at Choate, and Mrs. Davis and I sold our house in Yonkers and came to New York.

Always when I have the least to do I demand the most time in which to do it, just as when I am not writing at all I insist that I can't live without an elaborate writing room, although I know perfectly well that I have done the best work of my life with a

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ten-cent pad of paper and the top of a trunk. In any case, I found the ride to Yonkers too long, and we once more joined the ranks of apartment dwellers.

As a matter of fact, I have usually found that about the time a writer starts in surrounding himself with every luxury in the way of an aid to his work he never does very much with his swell equipment besides occasionally showing it off to admiring acquaintances. It is quite probable that the money he earned to pay for his elaborate study he earned by writing a play on the top of a barrel. I myself have worked in all sorts of places, ranging from a three-dollar-a-week hall bedroom to a studio library in a pent house in the Park Avenue section. During the most prolific years of my life most of my work was done at a desk in the living room of an apartment with two small boys playing about on the floor and crawling between my legs. It is, I suppose, because I have always had so much fun with my writing that the members of my family have never stood in any great awe of my labors, and I suppose the boys saw no good reason why I should

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try to keep an amusing game all to myself, and usually insisted on being let in on it.

Edgar Wallace told me last year that he loved New York and always had a wonderful rest when he came here. It was, he said, the noisiest city in the world and the only place on earth where he couldn't write. Personally I can write better in New York than I can anywhere else, and although I am afraid I demand more quiet and privacy as the years go past, I am still quite untroubled by anything less than a riveting machine.

Some rather facetious remarks have been made about the volume of my production, but this same Edgar Wallace makes me look like a drone. When I am hard at work I turn out about four thousand words a day, usually in longhand, written with the softest and dirtiest lead pencil that a nickel can buy. Mr. Wallace tells me that on a good day he dictates ten thousand words. I know that twenty-three per cent of all the novels sold in England last year were of his writing, and he calmly threw in three or four plays by way of good measure. Ever since I dined

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with him I have laughed with scorn at any one bold enough to insinuate that I write too much, and I have been filled with good resolutions.

I surely must settle down to work. No matter how much a man may enjoy his job, every writer in the world has times when he thinks he is through. It's part of the game. We all of us have hours of profound depression when we are afraid of the future and in terror of our own limitations. We are sure that no good story will ever again come to us and doubtful if we would know what to do with it if it did. This is natural enough when a writer has just finished a play or a novel, because, of course, he has put all he had into it and his mind feels empty. But this mood often comes at other times, and the best cure for it is to hang around doing nothing until you happen to read a fine novel that has just been published or see a really good play—the right play always sends me out of the theater walking on air, and I go to bed tingling all over to wake up the next morning with a new hope and a new determination.

The worst disease, however, that comes to a writer

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who has been at his job for a long time is the awful fear of being "dated." Of course it's hard for one of middle age to write of life in any other way than as he knows it, and equally, of course, our lasting impressions do not come to us after fifty. I fussed for a while over the fear of getting to be a back number, and wondered if I could possibly grow to understand what we were pleased to call "the new generation." I found, or fancied I found, a great change in the old world, until I happened to recall that these changes had been going on since time began. A very careful study of audiences convinced me that they still reacted to an honest emotion, just exactly as they always had done, and that the only difference in the world around me was that the old gods had different names.

To me, with my conviction that as the world goes on it gets better and more worth living in, it makes no difference at all whether it is the custom to say "Hail! Cæsar!" or "Hello, Cæsar," and I very much doubt if any of our changes are very much deeper than this. We were a sentimental people, as every race of adventurers must be. Now we have become

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a very practical race, hard-boiled, if one prefers to put it that way. A little while ago we slopped over about our emotions because that was the custom; to-day for the same reason we pretend we haven't any. Of course our emotions weren't any greater because we made a fuss about them, or any less because we now cover them up. The relationship between men and women has changed during the last ten years, so had it changed in the generation before that, and so on back to the time of Adam, but that relationship then and now was a thing of enormous interest, and a swell thing to write a play about.

It's the writer's business to meet the mood of the hour, and all he has to do to meet this mood is to learn to sympathize with it. Just so long as I feel myself a part of the life around me there is no reason why I shouldn't keep on writing, and at present I most decidedly do feel that. If the time ever comes when I find myself bewildered and afraid of a strange world that I no longer understand, I'll stop—or rather, on second thought—perhaps I'll write a play about how hard it is to understand it!

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At this time I stepped out of my job as President of the Dramatists' Guild and took the presidency of the Authors' League of America. This, as it happens, is not an honorary position, but comes under the head of honest labor, and during the long fight between the Dramatists and the Theatrical Managers' Association that resulted in the present Dramatists' contract, I served on all of the many committees in addition to my work as President of the League. I loved the work; the friendships I formed among the members of the fighting committees are among the pleasant and most helpful contacts of my life.

There are about a dozen men and women who mean a lot to me with whom I have worked for sixteen years to bring about decent conditions for writers. There are many more than a dozen now who are working faithfully for the Authors' League, but often, when I attend one of the meetings and sit at the crowded council table, I catch the eye of one of the old timers and wink pleasantly—we can remember years when there weren't enough authors around to fill the room with cigar smoke. We used to ask one

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another if it was worth while to keep on fighting. James Forbes always said that this was positively his last effort, but he always came back; so did the rest of us, all busy men, not one of us needing the help of any one to get decent contracts. We were proud of our calling and wanted to advance its dignity and importance, and I think that in the end our many years of hard work justified itself. The American Theatre is to-day under a temporary cloud. It may be one year or two years or three years before its old prosperity returns, but the Dramatists' Guild is the strongest and most powerful body of writing men in the world and there are plenty of strong men of half my age who are able and willing to keep it as powerful and as sane and moderate as it is to-day. No matter what you hear don't for a moment believe that the prosperity of our theater is not going to return,—the theater is safe and it always has been. Just so long as little boys instinctively pick up a stick and become brave knights and gallant soldiers, and as long as a girl child hugs a doll to her breast and becomes a mother, the theater will live. A combination of cir-

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cumstance, novel inventions, stupidity and greed, plus lack of leadership and the arrogance of organized labor, has resulted in sad days for many of us, but the turn of the wheel is already bringing about changes and sooner than most of you are yet ready to believe better days are coming.

If, when they come, the men who have been the leaders of the commercial theater have learned their lesson, the temporary setback will have been worth what it has cost; if they haven't, they will be forced to step aside and give up their power to those more worthy to possess it.

The sane, simple and practical way to govern the theater has been pointed out. Three times already I have served on committees whose object was to consolidate the interests of actors, managers and authors, and hand over the authority to a group of twelve, made up from the men of proved integrity among the three groups. We who have made a long study of conditions know that this composite intelligence could find a way to correct the principal evils that have been the cause of our loss of public confidence and support.

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Those of the public who really prefer to go to the picture houses can of course continue to go to them. Wise men of the theater know that in the end the picture houses are great incubators engaged in hatching out new audiences for us and that in a very short space of time we could have a road circuit beside which the old Stair and Havlin houses couldn't cast a shadow.

There are, however, some very definite evils in the present state of the theater and every one of them could be corrected or greatly reduced. The regulation of the sale of tickets has been taken in hand by a progressive group of managers and will be corrected if the managers can be controlled, which is a bit like saying we could do away with evil if there was no more sin. The unfair and unwise demands of the unions of stage hands and musicians could be regulated by an honest facing of facts and a fair presentation of present conditions. No organization has the right, or as a matter of fact the power, to go beyond a clearly marked line; the moment any group's demands become unfair there is very little diffi-

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culty in upsetting that group. It doesn't demand an Alexander, it simply calls for a little common sense.

No one of us really wants to kill the goose who lays the golden eggs. Help from the railroads would follow an intelligent presentation of our case. Clean theaters would promptly follow in the footsteps of a clean administration. Box office reform depends upon six words spoken by the right man with the right authority to back his six words up. Help from the newspapers does not depend, I am convinced, upon the spending of millions of dollars, but would follow an honest request for their assistance based upon the ground of the theater's cultural and educational value, always provided that we could show some claim to cultural and educational importance.

The revival of the road, until such time as the turn of the tide has made that revival automatic, could be accomplished under wise leadership that would work for, say, forty decent plays, decently produced, underwritten by local subscription lists. Any community of a hundred thousand population will furnish an au-

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dience, once they are assured that there is a certainty of their getting adult entertainment. These aren't day dreams; everybody knows them; several times we have banded together to fight for them. The last meeting called by John Golden of the managerial group actually had a real grip on this problem, only dinner time came around and we all went home. If some one were to call a meeting of a strong group of actors, authors and managers, all instructed to sit there until they accomplished something, I am sure we would at last be under way—provided always that no lawyers be allowed at the meeting and that it be called at a good restaurant.

During my two years with the Paramount Company, my contract reserved half of my time for my own private affairs and I divided this time as honestly as I knew how between my duties to the Authors' League and my writing. By now my son Donald had finished college and gone to Hollywood as a staff writer, and Owen had walked out on Professor Baker at Yale, horned into the theater when my back was turned and secured for himself the part of the son in

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THE BARKER with Dick Bennett in Chicago. This action of his, so his mother informed me, was the most dreadful calamity of modern times and would undoubtedly bring her in sorrow to the grave, but if you have ever seen her seated in an audience where this boy is a member of the cast of players, you might possibly read in her deeply absorbed face a certain smug satisfaction that would not, I am sure, make you think of either graves or calamities.

I, being of coarser stuff, never for a moment regretted the fact that these two boys of ours had insisted upon following in our footsteps; how could they do anything else? They were born of two stage-struck parents and had cut their teeth by biting managers who frequented our establishment. If a child learns anything in the home circle, how could they help learning about the theater? Their mother knows a little about things outside its range, but I know nothing else at all, not even enough to be ashamed of the fact. The great happiness of my life to-day is that as we grow older, the four of us, we grow closer together, and that I can talk with my sons of their problems with

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the authority of one who knows something about them.

In the fall of 1928 I wrote a play called *CARRY ON* with a fine part in it for young Owen. My intentions were good and I am sure he has quite forgiven me. Later he played in another of my authorship called *TO-NIGHT AT 12*, which was one of the sort of plays often described by Al Woods as "all right, but what the hell did you write it for?" In both of these, however, Owen fared better than I, and I knew that he was fairly started.

In 1928 I turned for a change to the writing of musical comedy and helped a little on *WHOOPEE*, produced by Ziegfeld with Eddie Cantor in the old Otto Kruger part, for *WHOOPEE* is an adaptation of our old friend *THE NERVOUS WRECK*, expertly tailored by Wm. Anthony McGuire.

I also fussed about with *LADY FINGERS*, a musical version of my old farce, *EASY COME, EASY GO*, and wrote a show called *SPRING IS HERE* for Aarons and Freedley. *SPRING IS HERE*, in spite of a good cast and charming score and lyrics by Rogers and Hart, was only so-so.

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As a matter of fact, Bill McGuire and Otto Harbach need not worry; they can have the musical comedy field so far as I am concerned. Of all the forms of writing I find it the least interesting and the most difficult; to me it remains a trick like putting peas up your nostrils, not at all impossible, but why do it? The mere statement that I soon discovered that the properly concocted musical show must be dominated by its score and not by its book is explanation enough as to why a vain old dramatist can't rave about this form of expression.

CHAPTER VIII / HOLLYWOOD

OF late years I have been jumping between the New York theater and the studios of Hollywood, searching for the old spark of enthusiasm that made our lives so colorful, and I find Hollywood dull and depressing and the Broadway theater sad and discouraged. This sounds, I suppose, like the opinion of advanced age, but as a matter of fact it isn't. I haven't had a minute in the last thirty years in which to grow old and I share not at all in the pessimism of those who think the theater is doomed or the optimism of those who think the talking picture is all triumphant. I am absolutely sure in my own mind that the theater will advance and that the talking picture will fall back, not to ruin, because it fills a place in the lives of so many people that nothing can replace. But soon now both theater and pictures will have a clearly defined audience—a true drama for an audience that demands

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a mature form of entertainment and a fictional entertainment for the millions who demand a sugar-coating on their pill.

The picture men need not begrudge us this share of the amusement business because without a prosperous theater they would be in a bad fix. They are, and it seems to me they must always be, dependent in great measure on the theater for their raw material. The good play does not always make the best picture, but a produced play is easier to judge than an unproduced manuscript, and the highly successful play is always welcome on the screen.

Then, too, the best training school for actors is not the screen but the stage, although screen and stage acting are very different and the great actor of the stage is by no means sure of screen success, while a pretty girl or good-looking boy with no training at all can frequently do better work than an actor of long training. In the theater the actor projects his personality, on the screen the camera projects it—a very different thing. Still, however, the theater is needed by the screen and there is no reason for a feud between

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them. In fact, the dangers and the problems that confront the theater are less complex than those the screen is called upon to face. We have but one—to do good plays. I have another silver cup for any one who can persuade me that a really fine play has ever failed. On the other hand, ahead of the men who control the destiny of the talking picture there are many problems, almost staggering in their complexity. Let me try to state the vital one, from figures I have carefully prepared.

Twenty percent of the talking picture audience is composed of children. Another twenty percent consists of persons to whom the English language is in whole or in part unfamiliar. Sixty percent of the remaining percentage consists of those with what we may safely call immature minds, leaving an audience to be thrilled, amused and satisfied in which persons of a fair degree of culture and taste number some thirty odd percent. If you care to stop for a moment over these figures, you may find in them the answer to many of your moments of bewilderment. To satisfy this thirty odd percent, who do the writing of and the

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critical condemnation of talking pictures and at the same time to thrill this seventy percent who put up the money that makes them possible, is already a big problem and it grows bigger every day as the novelty of the mechanical device wears off, and the suitable supply of fiction becomes exhausted.

Hollywood to-day demands about four hundred good stories every year, and my third and last silver cup goes to the one who can list for me four hundred great stories written since the world began. Just for fun I tried my hand at making such a list, and from a rather extensive knowledge of the fiction and the plays of both the past and the present I was able to get two hundred and eight. After that they began to fall into squads with the precision of well-drilled soldiers and although many of them told the same story very charmingly it still remained a twice-told tale.

I had, reluctantly, agreed to make a trip to Hollywood the previous spring for Mr. Sheehan of the Fox Company, and there I had made for Will Rogers an adaptation of my friend Homer Croy's novel, *THEY HAD TO SEE PARIS*, for the screen. As a result I had

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signed a six months' contract starting in December. My experience with Famous Players Lasky Company had been unsatisfactory in spite of the real kindness of Mr. Lasky, and I felt that under the present conditions an author's position in Hollywood left much to be desired. But I had the advantage of an unusual contract and I had two strong reasons for wanting to see more of Hollywood. The first reason was that both of my boys were there, and my wife and I are, I am afraid, rather too dependent on them and never completely satisfied unless they are near at hand. Then, too, I was greatly troubled by the difficulty of forming a fixed opinion of conditions out there and determined to at least satisfy myself that I understood them. I had never been able to see why a writer in Hollywood should be forced to deliver up his self-respect, and with it his only chance of being of real value. I saw both sides of the issue but to me the pressing need of the only men and women who are trained to write stories was so great that I thought it my duty, as one who has given a great part of his life to the effort to improve the condition of the men and women of his craft, to

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make an effort to find out if it wasn't possible to break down the barrier that has always existed between New York writers and the studio executives in Hollywood.

Owen was a featured player for Fox and Donald was a staff writer and stage director. When I left New York I was pledged to a six months' stay and had some difficulty in laying out my future plans with the degree of exactness that has become my habit; we got away at length, however, and I left behind me only the remains of one "tryout," a farce called *THE SHOTGUN WEDDING*, produced by Wm. Harris, Jr., for a brief tour and never developed beyond that point. *THE SHOTGUN WEDDING* was funny, but not funny enough. Wm. Harris, Jr., is, I think, the best judge of a play of any man alive, although his critical judgment has been developed to the same extent that Sherlock Holmes developed his sense of deduction, and when it comes to discovering a clew to a bad play he could give Sherlock a stroke a hole.

Mrs. Davis and I joined the boys on the Coast early in December and we had a very comfortable and happy winter. I made an adaptation of so *THIS IS LON-*

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DON for Will Rogers, worked with Sam Behrman and wrote and adapted a number of stories. I like writing for the pictures, or at least I want to like it. It is not at all a difficult form and I can see no mystery in it. It is just story writing; the difference in technique is no more different than the step between farce and drama writing and nowhere near so different as the dramatic form and the modern method of building musical comedy.

The difficulty with picture writing is and always has been to get what one writes past one's immediate supervisor and unfortunately this depends very little upon the value of what is written. Nowhere on earth are there so many totems, bugaboos and fetishes as there are in a motion picture studio and all argument is strictly forbidden. "Yes" is the only word ever spoken in the presence of the great out there, and an absurdity once perpetrated by executive order becomes a sacred custom and part of a ritual.

As a successful dramatist, I had become accustomed to having my opinion listened to with respect, and my judgment on questions of story construction was al-

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most always final. I have had many differences with managers, but never heard of any dramatist who at least wasn't given a chance to express his views on the work of his own brain and who was not consulted upon what was to be written into the story which was to bear his name. In Hollywood no author is ever considered to be of any importance at all. He ranks as a clerk to be put at any little job that comes to hand and after he has written a story, he never can by any possibility know what will be done to it before it gets to the screen. This is the outcome of the old days of silent pictures when a director took a company out on location and shot a story that he made up as he went along, very much as children who give shows for pins in a barn invent theirs. The talking picture brought something very like a drama form but the men in power, who had won their positions by using their own method, naturally enough prefer to keep on using it, in the first place because they had been successful with it, and in the second place because they don't know any other.

In any study of the motion picture business it is

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always well to remember that it is a very wonderful thing to be able to send a show in a tin can by mail or express to any location in the world, and that the marvel of these talking figures was for a long time so great that only the most exacting worried much about what they talked about. If, however, the writing of picture stories is ever to offer any attraction at all to a writer beyond the very generous salary he is offered, it is quite obvious that some change must be made in the present system. Just now no writer could possibly find any other reason for writing screen stories than the money he makes out of it, and quite as obviously any writer with the skill they sorely need can make plenty of money without going there. Good writers of to-day are well paid and any man or woman of the reputation for success that they demand is very likely to be in a position of financial independence that frees him from any necessity of surrendering his dignity and his integrity. To be sure, plenty of writers are there now and plenty of others are probably anxious to go. But, as the good ones come to realize the absolutely hopeless task that confronts them, they will return to their

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former tasks, because they must, if they are ever going to write anything worth writing, preserve their originality of thought and style. Once they surrender that they are lost. Then it doesn't in the least matter whether they go or stay, they won't be worth anything in any case.

Hollywood is the strangest and the maddest place the world has ever seen. It is beautiful; its sunshine, its flowers, its bold sea coast with the blue Pacific challenging any beauty of Southern France or Italy, are really thrilling. It is a beehive of activity, it is the most cosmopolitan city in the world—and the dullest. For some reason one comes away from Hollywood with that impression stamped firmly in the memory. It's a bore. Forget this "wild party" stuff. Don't pay any attention to stories of the glamour and excitement of Hollywood. It's just a dull place, a grand spot for winter golf, but a wash-out for any mature person who depends in the least upon mental stimulation; there isn't any. The picture business is the second, or the third, or the first or some such silly number among the world's industries, which is probably what's the mat-

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ter with Hollywood and with the motion pictures. They are standardized, circumscribed, advertised and circumcised to such an extent that all they can do is say "Mamma" when you step on them.

What is easily the best medium by which to gain the ear of the world has gained it under the splendid leadership of extremely clever and tireless business men, and, having gained it, doesn't say anything worth listening to. The picture business in salesmanship, in organization, in mechanical and technical development, in direction and in photography is amazing, and there they stop. They fall down hard on the basic commodity they are selling; their story product isn't good enough. They know this, of course, as well as I do, but they do not know the reason or at least those of them who do know the reason won't tell the truth about it because if they did, it would mean the end of their importance.

They will tell you that their writers fall down on them and that is in fact true. I have been fighting authors' battles all my life, but I have no defense to offer for the New York writer of big name and bigger

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salary who goes to Hollywood with a nose turned up in contempt and takes their money and makes wise cracks at their expense. I see their side of the case so clearly that for three years I have been trying to do something to clarify this situation. The barrier between real writers and the studios is, I am convinced, the greatest obstacle to the advance of motion pictures and the real trouble I can sum up in one sentence: "The picture stories are not written by authors, they are written by executives!"

During the winter in Hollywood I was a guest at a dinner given to Frederic Lonsdale, the English dramatist, by Arthur Richman. Around the tables in that room were fifty-four very well-known and very successful dramatists and novelists of New York and London. These men were there because they were successful and important men asked to meet and welcome a distinguished English writer to whom Mr. Richman wished to do honor. These fifty-four men have written many times fifty-four successful plays. They were not dated, worn out, or exhausted old fellows in their dotage, but men in their full swing—

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Sidney Howard, Louis Bromfield, Max Anderson, Laurence Stallings, A. E. Thomas, John Colton, Martin Flavin, Sam Behrman, and many more of the same importance, three Pulitzer Prize winners, three members of The National Institute; surely here was talent enough to write good stories. These fifty-four men were almost all of them questioned by me at some time during the winter and not one of them who had been writing in Hollywood for over a month could tell me that he had found it possible to do good work or that he could see any hope at all of ever being allowed to write the sort of thing that he had been successful enough in writing to cause the heads of the studios to pay him his large salary.

I heard stories told not in anger but in honest bewilderment that would have amazed me had they not been in line with the mass of information I had been collecting. Thirteen writers of standing had been given the same story to adapt to the screen, the idea being that bits of each would be collected by some inspired executive and formed into a masterpiece. Of course thirteen writers can't write a story any more

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than thirteen cooks can bake a cake. One of the finest dramatists of our time had been for six weeks working on an adaptation of a novel and at the end of that time some one discovered that the rights to the novel belonged to another company. A fine novelist and a really distinguished dramatist were making over a dated and absurd old melodrama, while a very famous melodramatic craftsman sat in the next office trying to dramatize a very light and fluffy novel. The best dialogue writer in America, who is famous for his brilliant and sophisticated wit, was writing a Chicago gang war yarn, two very serious men of real literary taste were working together on a slapstick musical show, while two famous musical comedy writers were doing their best with an English drawing-room comedy.

And so it went. These men were well treated as in my experience all writers have been out there, contracts are always kept to the letter and salaries are always paid. The stories these writers were working on will very few of them ever see the screen, and those few will be made over time and time again under the

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eye of some supervisor. The assistance of trained screen writers will be called for and before any picture results practically nothing written by any one of the fifty-four men at that dinner will be left. Now I am going to admit that out of these fifty-four men it is extremely unlikely that there were five who knew enough about pictures to be able to write a proper "shooting script," but I am not going to admit that in that room that night there weren't brains and talent and energy enough to have written ten times more stories and ten times better ones than they ever were allowed to write.

If a ball club was formed of the nine best players in the leagues and that ball club lost every game, the sporting public would say that it was the result of bad handling, as of course it would be. If fifty-four men who have written several hundred good plays can't write more than ten bad screen stories in six months my opinion is that they have been badly handled, and I see no other sane deduction from the facts.

Let me tell you, quite honestly, the usual experience of a writer who comes to Hollywood for the first time,

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not my own experience, but that of practically every man and woman with whom I have talked. The writer will be pleasantly and kindly received and a meeting will be arranged with the head of the studio. This gentleman will hand him a play or a novel and he will be asked to read it over, take a few days to think out a novel treatment of it, and hold himself ready to be called to a story conference.

After a day, or two, or three, or a week, or a month or something like that, for the studios are busy places and the executives' time is valued far above rubies, the author is sent for and enters the presence. He is naturally ready with a carefully thought out method of treatment for the play or story he has been asked to study and eager to make a good first impression. Before he can tell his story, however, the executive will carelessly remark: "Did I tell you the ideas we had for this story?" The author will naturally reply that nobody has told him anything at all since his arrival except that "California is the most wonderful place in the world, and you don't really mean to tell me that New York is still there." Then the executive will in-

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form him that "they" have some ideas of treatment of that story and perhaps he had better mention them. It has been decided not to have the scenes laid in China—"there have been too damned many of those Chink operas lately"—and anyway New York background is sure fire; the girl mustn't be engaged to be married to the Unitarian missionary, she's got to be the mistress of a side show barker, and earning her living as a high diver. "Will Hays can talk as much as he wants to but everybody knows what's a proper costume for a high diver."

Aside from that, and a happy ending, nobody wants to make any real changes in the story. The author, a bit bewildered but still anxious to make good here, makes the first concession that results in absolutely killing any hope of his knowledge and experience being of any value, as by now his creative power has been entirely pushed aside; he has joined the ranks of "picture writers" in five minutes.

Armed with the above-mentioned instructions, the author retires to his office, very probably the first office he ever had in his life, and starts to work. The studio

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is always generous in the time allowed, generous in fact in every way in their treatment of writers, and nobody rushes our hero who, in the course of time, say, three weeks, during which he has drawn a salary of from four hundred to six or seven times four hundred dollars each week, turns in his completed story.

This story is read and another story conference is called. Here the author meets the director and the supervisor. Every one of course knows what a director is. Some persons, however, and I am one of them, do not know exactly what supervisors are. As Mahomet was the Prophet of God so supervisors are there to add to the power and the glory, and their voices are softly tuned to utterance of the sweet word "yes." At this first group conference it is stated that the story seems hopeless but stout hearts never despair and ideas begin to be thrown about the room with an ease that amazes the writer who, owing to the comparative poverty of his own powers of invention, is quite unable to keep up.

The results of this meeting are a complete recasting of the story. Now it's back in China, but with a new

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set of characters and a different plot. After three weeks of story conferences, the director confides to the author that the trouble with this yarn is the supervisor is all wet and the best way out of it is for the author to come to his house at night and they'll begin all over again and get a sure fire knockout.

In two or three more weeks of hard work the story is ready and, owing to the great enthusiasm of the director, is "sold" to the studio executive and his O.K. is put on it. O.K.'s are very important, for without them no picture can be put into production. At last, however, the story is ready and the date of production arrives, the author's story is actually about to be placed on the screen!—and how! The director, now that the picture is actually in production, is in absolute power, and he calmly throws away the story and strings together an entirely different one that is no more like the script so gravely O.K.'d than it is like the original one written by the author. Mad as this may seem it is actually what is being done in every studio.

Some supervisors are good men; they know better, but standing as they do between the devil and the deep

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blue sea they drift along. Many directors know a story, even if very few can write one, but the heritage of power is very strong and men who in the days of the silent pictures "shot their story on the cuff" bitterly resent any authority but their own, and write and produce only the sort of thing that they have learned by experience how to handle. The great directors, Frank Borzage, Louis Milestone, Lubitsch, King Vidor and a few others, know story values when they read them and have so much pride in their work that they can, like all strong men, afford to have less vanity. Directors from the theaters, like the De Milles, and others of the men who learned values in the library and the university, know of course the folly of such childish story building, but in the great volume of production their share is small. In spite of this the big man in Hollywood is the director—they are strong men, tireless, and creative.

The ideal screen story will, I think, always be written by the director or directed by the writer, the only difference here is in the words. The man who creates the mood of a story is the author of it, no matter by

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what name you call him. I have nothing but admiration for the director who can write a story or for the author who can direct one, but at present all directors without exception change and re-write every story they handle and there are one hundred and eight active directors in Hollywood. I think it fairly obvious that there are not and never have been and never will be one hundred and eight constructive story experts alive at any one time.

In any case, at the present writing the director is king and the writer is nobody. The opinion of the great of Hollywood as to the importance and the dignity of a writer was expressed by the head of one of the large companies who calmly announced during the early spring that he was about to try a new policy. He was going to discharge all his writers and engage new ones selected from men who had never written anything in their lives, to see if he couldn't get some new ideas.

Aside from the absurdity of sending for a plumber when the baby is sick, the gentleman forgot that if his "new writers who had never written anything" had new ideas they would never in the world be allowed to

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use them. At present the motion pictures are an imitative and not a creative medium and I very much doubt if the gentleman ever met a new idea in all his life.

This is the present system and if its results are satisfactory to the men who have poured their millions into this industry then I am just another New York writer trying to tell Hollywood how to make pictures. If, however, there is any feeling that better work could be done, should be done, and must be done if this wonderful medium is ever to take the place it ought to take in our national life, if this advance of two hundred million is to be held and satisfied, then there is one way to do it, and only one.

The answer is very simple, so simple as to make it seem silly. Put in every studio a real editor with full authority. There isn't one in Hollywood, and there never has been. Such a man could save each of the four great studios from half a million to a million a year simply by killing the impossible junk before it goes into production. Such a man knows writers and how to make them write. He knows how to make them earn their salary or how to get rid of them; that's

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his business. It's folly to say that such men can't be had. Every great newspaper has one; so does every big publishing house; and when they die others are found to take their place. What they don't know about pictures they could learn. Every editor learns the taste and wants of the public he serves. Bob Davis sat in Munsey's office and picked the fiction for five different publications with five different classes of readers, and when he couldn't find the type of story he wanted, he took a writer to lunch and in a month he had it.

That's just an editor's job. It is possible that even a fine editor might make some mistakes until he learned the taste of the picture public, but are there no mistakes made now? What percentage of pictures produced to-day is satisfactory, even to the companies who produce them? Think it over! I am one of the few writers who enjoyed writing for the screen, partly because of a habit I have of laughing at silly people, and partly because I love to write anything at all. I am not of the number who couldn't catch the trick and retired in anger and contempt. When I left

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Hollywood in June it was because I "had a play," and I have more offers to return there than one man could by any possibility take advantage of. I am too old a writer and too deeply devoted to my craft to hesitate to set down the result of three years of thought. I have never, in the theater or in Hollywood, sold to any man my right to free speech or freedom of thought and it is rather late for me to change.

It is a curious thing how, in the amusement business, history keeps on repeating itself. In the years I have been a student of conditions in this field, I have seen the rise and fall of many different forms of popular entertainment. The great chain of theaters of the Klaw and Erlanger Syndicate, the Stair and Havlin circuit of cheap theaters, the once highly popular stock houses—the Keith vaudeville, the old Columbia burlesque wheel, the circus, the skating rinks, all of these sprang into popularity under the guidance of shrewd showmanship. Their amazing profits drew big investors who poured their money in, building new theaters, consolidating chains of old ones, enlarging, spreading out. Then, long before the capital engaged

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could earn any real return, the boom was over and the investing public held the bag. There has never been a year when more money hasn't been lost in theatrical ventures than has been made. I think the reason is that the men we have called shrewd showmen are in reality only shrewd business men and the enterprises started by their energy and ambition have first languished and then died because these men in every case failed to learn the rules of the game they were playing.

To satisfy and hold the interest of any great percentage of the public is a big job for a catch-penny showman. The reactions of a composite audience might well be studied by scientific minds. Two Topseys and two Lawyer Marks's couldn't keep the old *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* shows alive. The old minstrel shows died of their own unimaginative elaboration; three-ring circuses only postponed the evil days for the tent shows where perhaps something new in one ring might have saved them. You can't make a business out of any form of show business that will stand up beyond the point where the brains are in the business and not in the show.

CHAPTER IX ✓ I'D LIKE TO DO IT AGAIN

IN June my contract was up and for the moment at least I had had enough of Hollywood. Some day I am going back, but not until I get some real assurance of going there as I go into a theater, to practice the trade I have learned. Owen had returned to New York in May to create a part in a new play with Richard Bennett. This play, *SOLID SOUTH*, was running in Chicago for the spring and summer and was booked to open on Broadway in September.

Donald had almost finished his first play, in which I took as deep an interest and delight as his mother would have taken in his first baby, had his activities led him in that direction. I knew this play had real promise and would soon call him to New York and that once more we would be united. And so in June Mrs. Davis and I returned. As I picked up my tools

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and started to work I knew that the round peg had slipped comfortably back into the round hole. The fact that *WHOOPEE* was still running in November saved me from a sad fate. For thirty years I have had at least one play produced in New York each season. I'm going to have one produced for as many more seasons as I can, more than one if I can, and as good plays as I can.

It may well be that this thing of producing plays isn't as wonderful a thing as I think it is, but it's my trade. I have served the theater joyfully for a long time and if a good fairy appeared before me to-day and offered me the famous "one wish" I am sure that I should say, "Please, good fairy, I'd like to do it again."

This doesn't mean that my life has been all happiness. No man's has been. Perhaps it is best that way. We have had our griefs, my wife and I, our share of sorrow, discouragement and our happiness, but, if I may for a moment borrow the flamboyant style of my youth, as I look back over the tapestry of my life, the bright spots do not seem so bright as I had remembered

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them, and the dark spots do not seem so dark. The whole fabric looks rather like one of these old rag carpets of my mother's time—woven of bits of crimson and blue, of yellow and black—blending now in a soft harmony, softened by time.

THE END

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